

The Last Of Us: Surviving The Super Apocalypse

by Keith McNally

What if the cordyceps pandemic was so severe that there were no weapons or items left for Joel to pick up? Author Keith McNally uses this bizarrely difficult playthrough to discuss the mechanics and storytelling of 2013's The Last Of Us.

This Book Is Free!

I love it when digital works are free. Many times in my wayward life, I've been stuck on the outside of a pay gate, with no credit card to pay for something I wanted to check out. To me, that kind of gatekeeping is not appropriate to the modern world. In the old world, you paid your money, and you got a product. But in the digital world, you get the product, and you can choose to pay if you enjoy it. If you choose not to, then so be it. So be it!!

What I'm saying is that I'm a pirate, and it irks me when people rail against digital piracy. "You shouldn't download that! Someone worked hard on that!" Man, get out of here. I don't even know if I'm a fan of this thing yet. So now that I've written my own book, I'm putting my money where my mouth is. This book will always be free; if you'd like to help support my work, you can buy a copy at:

<https://www.amazon.com/Last-Us-Surviving-Super-Apocalypse-ebook/dp/B076MGLY44/>

But if that's out of your means, just try to spread the word, and thank you.

You know, while we're on the topic: If you're one of these people who treats pirating old ROMs like it's a horrible crime -- Fucking quit it, man. No one's paying attention to what you do, and no one cares if you emulate Batman for the NES. Not one person. So chill out.

Ladies and gentlemen, a toast to piracy! A toast... to *the future!* If there are any sections of this book that you enjoy, feel free to post them wherever you like. You can even rewrite segments to make me look like a crazed bigot, if you really feel like it.

Wait -- My legal team (estranged Aunt) is saying that I shouldn't suggest people slander me. She says a Creative Commons license would be more appropriate. But what does

she know about comedy? If it's funny enough, I could be into some slander. Libel, whatever. There's no need to take the idea off the table, is all I'm saying.

Again, my legal counsel is shaking her head. I dunno, it's not like I can stop these people. It's the internet! They're gonna do whatever they want, so fuck it! Fuck everything! Sorry, language. Look, we'll talk about it later, okay? Jesus. Sorry.

Sidebars

When reading a book, a person sometimes thinks, "I don't want this book to end." But with other books, they think, "I wish this book would end." I've tried to accomodate both types of readers.

Sidebars comprise about half of this book, and some of them get pretty esoteric. So the sections which are directly about my playthrough of The Last Of Us are titled in **bold**. The sidebars are titled in *italics*.

We're all gonna die some day; there's no need to be reading some boring book while you're waiting for death to kiss you shyly on the genitals. If you find that you don't like even the mainline sections, this book is presented in a convenient digital format, which can be easily deleted.

You may notice that all the segments in this introduction are titled in italics. So if you wanna get straight to reading about The Last Of Us, this is the stuff you'll wanna skip. But lemme tell you, you'll be missing out on some good stuff! Some good, self-indulgent stuff.

Introduction

Hi, my name's Keith! I'm in my thirties, I'm Canadian, and I love talking about video games. Do you have an estranged relationship with someone? No problem! Just talk with them about video games! Is there someone you talk to every day? No problem! Talk to them about video games! Video games are the best. I feel about gaming the same way that dumb religious people feel about The Bible: Waaaayyy into it!

[note: consider changing that]

I heard that a guy wrote a whole book about Spec Ops: The Line, and that seemed pretty neat. Not neat enough for me to read it, but neat in *concept*. Then I learned about Ben Abraham's Far Cry 2 book, where he chronicled a single permadeath run of that psychotically difficult game.

Soon after that, I discovered eight-hundred-thousand other books written about video games. The facts were clear: People were writing book-length discussions about specific video games. That was a real thing that real people were really doing.

So I placed my hand on my roommate's PlayStation 3, and solemnly vowed to join the ranks of these goddamn nerds. For choice of subject, I turned to the game I had been playing and re-playing compulsively since its release: The Last Of Us.

The Last Of Us is a goddamn masterpiece. I'm fascinated by people's different interpretations of its story, and also really like its mechanics. I wanted to try rattling that cage a bit, so I devised a playthrough where I would pick up absolutely no items. I wanted to see if The Last Of Us could stand up to some fuckery.

I'll describe how I came up with that absurd idea once we get into the book proper. For now, let's kick off with a round of highly-entertaining bookkeeping!

The Cover

My buddy Joel made the cover for this book. Playing The Last Of Us must have seemed weird to him, what with all the characters saying his name all the time. I'll have to wait until the gritty reboot of Keith Courage In Alpha Zones [5.5/10 - IGN.com] for a similar experience. Joel is a graphic design wizard, so if you'd like to pitch him some work, you can contact him at:

info@squidpod.com

Sources

I'm not gonna cite sources in this book. It's not that I don't want to, it's that my memory is garbage. I've read a lot of articles, and listened to a mountain of podcasts about The Last Of Us. But I don't remember the source of anything I've heard in my entire life, let alone those.

So there'll be a lot of "Somebody on a podcast said this" or "I read somewhere that"; if I knew I was gonna write a book about The Last Of Us, I probably would have taken some notes. But in a way, I like pulling strictly from memory. For a piece of information to have stayed in my head means it must have been pretty interesting. I just won't be able to tell you specifically where it came from.

What can I say? Journalism's dead. It's *fucking* dead. Future generations are gonna laugh at the very idea. But if I say something particularly wacky, and Google isn't able to verify it, just assume I was told it by a ghost, and take it as you would any mere ghost opinion.

Spoilers!

This book is obviously full of Last Of Us spoilers. Tess dies! Marlene dies! Fuck! It's all spoiled! But I'm also gonna spoil any other game that I want, at any time, with no warning whatsoever. If that fills you with anxiety, then I guess you better get the fuck out of here.

If someone has an early copy of a game, then of course they should keep plot details to themselves. But once a game is in general release, all bets are off. People who crow about spoilers make me wanna barf into some other barf, then eat the resulting mega-barf so that I double-barf. If you care so much about spoilers, then play the frigging games, or shut your yap.

To me, one of the most interesting and instructive things about art is to discuss its meaning. It frustrates me to see those kinds of discussions constantly curtailed, for fear of "spoilers".

And let's be clear: When game nerds talk about spoilers, all they're really interested in is the body count. "Who lives and who dies" is not the point of a story. If a single sentence can ruin your experience with a game, then you're really not approaching art in the right way. That's a judgment call, and I'm making it.

So in summary: If you've ever complained about spoilers for an older game, then take a

fucking hike, dicky. Also, best wishes.

Positive Spoilers

I've actually become kind of a fan of spoilers. We truly do live in a media flood -- There are more games, movies, tv shows, books and comics than we could ever hope to absorb in a hundred lifetimes. Three hundred hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute -- The riverbanks have eroded, and the flood's not gonna stop until our whole society outright collapses.

So when someone says, "You should play this game, but I can't tell you anything about it", chances are I'm not gonna play it. I'm drowning in art, and I don't know if you're throwing me a life raft or a rock. I need more information.

I recently played Her Story and Brothers: A Tale Of Two Sons, both after listening to spoiler discussions about them. I was intrigued by what I'd heard, and knowing some of the plot details did not meaningfully detract from those games. More importantly, those discussions helped guide me toward ever playing those games at all.

I know the Spoiler Guard think they're justified in their constant censorship of game discussions, but I think they've way overplayed their hand. At this point, they're basically just annoying shits.

I had no editorial guidance while writing this book. Ahh... it feels good.

Difficulty

Maybe reading this book will get you in the mood to re-play The Last Of Us. You could do a play-along! But if you've never played the game on at least Hard difficulty, you've gotta try it. Also, turn off Listen Mode.

I know these ideas sound distressing at first, but they're absolutely worthwhile. The different difficulty settings in The Last Of Us make a huge difference to the story being presented. The integration of story and gameplay is one of the most impressive things about The Last Of Us, and that's lost when your inventory is flooded with items. Normal mode is much too forgiving, and it really takes the edge off of Joel and Ellie's struggle.

I'll get deeper into my theories about game difficulty later on, but for now, just trust me: You won't need the excessive amount of items that Normal mode throws at you. I'm gonna beat this whole game without picking up any items at all, for christ's sake. So

believe me -- You got this.

Q: You gotta do what?

A: You gotta believe!

Grounded Mode

The playthrough discussed in this book was done on the PlayStation 3, on Survivor difficulty. This book took me so long to write that Grounded difficulty didn't exist when I started, and thank christ it didn't. Not picking up items on Survivor was insane enough -- If I tried to do it on Grounded mode, I'd probably still be trying.

Afterward, I did a Grounded playthrough on my friend's PlayStation 4. Whew, doggy... Grounded Mode is no joke. I did notice a few new things while I was getting my head continually blown off, so I've included occasional Grounded Mode sidebars, to discuss the game under that psychotic level of difficulty.

Note: Grounded Mode is still easier to complete than Drake's Fortune is on Crushing. That first Uncharted game is fucking impossible.

So, I think that about covers it. Let this book... begin! If you want, you can play a drinking game, where you take a shot each time I mention The Last Of Us. But you will certainly die.

The Last Of Us: Surviving The Super Apocalypse

Options

For the sake of completionism, let's start right at the beginning. Let's load this game up.

Load Times

Man, PlayStation 3 games take a long time to load. Navigating through all the menus is torture. In the old days, you could just slam a game in and start playing. Sega Master System games would be on a liquidation sale, and you could get them for five bucks a pop. None of 'em were good, but you didn't care. You could have the impulse to play *Fantasy Zone: The Maze*, and a few moments later, you were doing it. Then a few moments later you'd be playing something else, 'cause that game sucked.

The Title Screen

Every part of The Last Of Us is so well done. Even the logo is awesome. I don't know why the title screen shows a window with cracked paint on the windowsill, but it's great. Ellie's knife is in the sill now, signifying that I've completed at least one playthrough. The window is overgrown with plants, and is open a bit, its glass mostly missing. I've got no theories about what any of that means, it's just cool. But hey, at least I'm not making up theories to try to sound smart.

That being said, maybe the ambiguity of the title screen does make a statement, about how this game is not gonna lean on familiar tent-poles. Granted, it's a zombie game about a brown haired, bearded white guy. But the title screen is a damn window. It's the first sign that The Last Of Us leans a bit more art-game than your standard big budget strangulation simulator.

Maybe the title screen is the first step in preparing the player for the ending. It's a sign that decisions in this game's design are not gonna be democratized. The title screen is a dang window, for christ's sake. No committee in the world chose that.

Alright. Let's check out these options.

Difficulty: Survivor. Check.

You can turn the gore off. Huh. I think I'll leave that on.

Controls: Inverted.

Remember how I mentioned that this book is filled with long, barely-relevant asides? Any time The Last Of Us caused me to think of something, I wrote about it, and the Options screen led to a wack of those. So this is where we find out whether or not you like my off-topic ramblings. I hope you do. I like you, maybe.

Again, the gameplay segments are titled in **bold**, in case you get tired of reading all my charming side-shit.

Inverted Controls

I've always played games with my vertical controls inverted. Old flight simulators may be partially to blame -- They were the first three dimensional games I played, on an old monochrome PC. I internalized the idea that pushing forward makes your view tip downward.

I've heard a theory that inverted controls relate to how a person perceives games: If you imagine the point of focus as being the game character themselves, you'll want pressing up to make the character look up. But if you imagine the point of focus as your actual self, playing the game, there's a fulcrum point between you and the screen. It's like a seesaw, so you want pressing up to tip the camera downward.

Whatever it is, I can barely play games if the controls aren't inverted. My vision keeps drifting toward the ceiling, and in tense moments I just spazz out.

Invert Update!

Holy cow! During the time I spent writing this book, I miraculously managed to rewire my brain. After a lifetime of using inverted controls, I no longer do, and the switch was totally inadvertent.

I got a new laptop, and decided to re-play Fallout: New Vegas. I'd never played its DLC, and I was pretty jazzed about Fallout 4. I didn't yet know that Fallout 4 would have most of its rpg elements removed, and would be boring as fuck.

New Vegas was a lot of fun on a second playthrough, now that I had a sense of how that game wanted to be played. I initially tried to sequence break my way into New Vegas,

and the game fought hard against me. So I thought, "Fine, fuck you. I'll put off going to Vegas for as long as possible." These were both miserable decisions, and messed with the game's storytelling considerably. I was a lot happier when me and New Vegas were both on the same page.

Meanwhile, I was waiting for the world's slowest controller to arrive in the mail, and I didn't have a mouse. So I ran around the Mohave with the trackpad, my hand formed into an awkward claw. Under those bizarre conditions, playing inverted didn't seem intuitive. So I logged a hundred hours of non-inverted gameplay.

When I finally plugged in a controller, my sickness was cured! Through some transitive miracle, inverted controls no longer felt right to me. So, that's a weird road to walk, and maybe it won't work for anybody else. But if you're tired of being the guy who's always gotta go into Options every time someone hands you a controller, trackpad lunacy worked for me!

Controllers

I used to be a big keyboard and mouse guy, and in the frenetic days of Quake, that shit was required. If you look back at gameplay footage of Quake, it seems insane. It's more like a conceptual experience than a game. It's unhinged, your thoughts being processed directly into action, with seemingly no middle man.

Modern games are much slower, and I think a lot of that has to do with controllers. However, that more deliberate pace has led me to prefer the controller experience. The speed of a mouse makes it hard to feel like an actual person. In the old days, it was customary to set your mouse sensitivity as high as your brain could handle. But I'd rather have a greater sense of reality, even if it means getting shot in the face a few extra times. Overall, I like controllers. Fascinating.

Sound Sensitivity

My sensitivity to sound is pretty severe. I think it might border on misophonia. I don't like it when cutscenes in games have their own volume setting, without taking into account the audio options I've chosen. I've got everything nice and balanced so that playing a game doesn't seem like a knitting needle stabbing me in my ear, but then the pre-mixed cutscene audio has me diving for the tv remote.

Every game has some weird setting or another. In general, I think designers can only be as detail-oriented as their biology will allow them to be. It would probably never occur

to a designer that their game is hard for a color blind person to play, if they aren't color blind themselves. It takes a color blind person to point it out.

Similarly, I think every audio department should employ a person with abnormal sound sensitivity. They could point out things, like how plate armor in Dark Souls doesn't have to clink loudly with every step. For me, it's like certain armor sets have an added stat requirement called "turning the sound off". A relatively famous example would be how every guard in Skyrim talks about having taken a fucking arrow to the knee. They had half a dozen different actors all record that same line. It's baffling. It's like they wanted people to turn the sound off.

"Arrow To The Knee" was bad enough for everybody to notice, but to we sound-obsessed weirdos, a lot of games seem similarly exasperating. If characters are gonna say the same lines over and over, it'd be much better to have them say nothing at all. Silence in a game world takes a long time before it seems out of place. Whereas hearing the same dialogue twice in succession brings the whole simulation down immediately.

Languages

There's an option to set the audio to French. I went to a French elementary school, but never use my French. I should try this sometime. If you ever play Heavy Rain, play it in French. Even if you have to rely on the subtitles, it's still incredibly better.

Sadly, playing half of Heavy Rain is about the only time I've used my bilingualism in my adult life. I'm sorry, France. We just didn't love each other hard enough.

In the Bonus: Cinematics menu, each cinema has a watercolor-style thumbnail. I've never noticed them before now. They look real nice.

Stats

Let's look at some of my statistics, after three playthroughs:

Total Kills - 1630

Total Melee Kills - 975

Total Deaths - 231

Accuracy - 74%

Kills While Holding A Human Shield - 0

Molotovs Crafted - 0

Brick Or Bottle Hits - 311 (whooooaaooohhh...)

Bricks

As I learned more about the combat system, it became clear that bricks and bottles are like nuclear bombs. After you hit your opponent with one of those, they're totally helpless. It's the auto-targeting that really makes them effective. I'm gonna miss having them during this playthrough.

Crafting Molotovs

The fact that I crafted zero molotovs is telling. The notion of molotovs and health kits requiring the same components to craft is interesting -- Should a player choose to create an offensive item, or a defensive one? But having started my first playthrough on Hard difficulty, the decision was essentially made for me. I needed health kits. I didn't have enough spare crafting items for the luxury of molotovs. I felt up against the wall all the time, so crafting molotovs never truly crossed my mind.

Human Shields

"Kills While Holding A Human Shield" is something I wasn't aware of at all. I always like to turn off as many HUD elements as I can, and I love when games find ways to integrate that information directly into the game. Shout out to Dead Space. So I had turned off the on-screen combat prompts, and it wasn't until I watched someone else playing that I saw the "Triangle To Grab A Weakened Opponent" prompt.

However, I suspect my "Kills While Holding A Human Shield" stat would still be at zero. Why use a bullet, when you can choke a man for free? My grandpa always said that. Funny guy. Bit of a murderer.

Trophies

Let's just cut to the chase: Nobody really cares what you do in life. You could be the President of the United States, pull down your pants in the middle of the United Nations, shit in your own hand, eat it, then do a backspin, and it'd only be in the news for a couple of months. Hoping someone will be impressed by your PlayStation trophies is a pretty slim hope. It's like asking your Mom to watch you jump from a diving board, except your Mom might actually humor you.

That being said, sometimes trophies do offer ideas for alternative strategies that can be fun to try. I'm not opposed to trophies, *per se*. But as soon as gathering trophies turns

into busy work, you owe it to yourself to fucking quit it. At least try to pretend that your goddamn life is worth something to you.

Greg Miller and Colin Moriarty, while huge fans of The Last Of Us, have often commented that the game has an atrocious trophy list. On a conventional playthrough, very few trophies will pop. The trophies in The Last Of Us can only be earned through deliberate busy-work, done during subsequent playthroughs.

I can see how that may not be very fun for a trophy hunter, but I greatly appreciate that separation. Nothing interrupts the tone of a story more than receiving a god damn trophy. On my first playthrough, I don't think I heard that trophy noise once, and I don't think that was a failure of trophy design. I think that was a very deliberate choice, and I wholeheartedly applaud it. If someone wants to chase trophies, let them do it on their own time, during subsequent playthroughs. For someone trying to be immersed in the game's story, there's no need for trophy notifications to be jingling in the corner of the screen.

No offense to Colin and Greg, who I love dearly. Trophy-chasers though they may be.

The Most Egregious Use Of Trophies

Shadow Of The Colossus is a game where atmosphere is key to its minimalist storytelling. The initial excitement of bringing down enormous creatures gives way to a creeping unease... Where it's presumed that the player character is, by default, the hero, the reality of seeing these creatures systematically slaughtered becomes hard to ignore.

In the PS3 re-release of Shadow of the Colossus, after each Colossus is killed, a bright little trophy notification appears. What. The. ShitFuck. Talk about losing tone control. It's like putting a "Hi! My Name Is" sticker on van Gogh's *The Scream*, or some other such artsy example. Know your place, trophies. If you're interfering with the experience, then *you gotta go*.

I am aware that trophy notifications can be turned off, and after killing that first Colossus, you can be damn sure I did. You wanna talk an atrocious trophy list, Shadow Of The Colossus is the champ.

New Game Plus

New Game Plus seems pretty pointless in The Last Of Us. It carries over all your previous upgrades, making the game easier to beat, rather than harder. That's kind of a

strange decision; I expected more of a Dark Souls style difficulty ramp. If I wanted the game to be easier, I would have set the game to an easier difficulty. In a sense, my Super Apocalypse idea of not picking up any items is a self-made form of NG+.

Alright, that covers the Options menus. Let's start this bad boy up.

Loading Spores

Even the loading screen, a burst of spores drifting across the screen, is pretty beautiful. God dammit, I love this game.

I initially didn't realize that these languid spores even were a loading screen. After seeing the weird "window pane" title screen, I thought maybe the spores were just another artsy visual. I would have been okay with that. I think there's an argument to be made for enforced contemplation time in games -- Why not stare at some spores for awhile?

In a later update to the game, a little "percentage loaded" indicator appears at about 70%. I'm okay with that, too. I guess the spores alone were a bit abstract.

Prologue - Texas

As excited as I am to get back into the Last Of Us' world, there is a part of me that always finds the opening a bit tough to get through. Not because the opening is bad, but because the opening is so *good*.

Each of my playthroughs becomes a little more mechanical, trying to delve deeper into the game's systems. But I can't jump right in -- I've gotta get through this opening, which is so goddamn sad and beautiful... It's a very different experience from the rest of the game. While going through the opening, the effectiveness of bricks during combat could not be further away from mattering.

There's a part of me that wishes for a whole game like this opening. An interactive movie is not something I would normally ask for, but Naughty Dog handle it so well. As will come up many times in this book, there's no opinion I have about video games that Naughty Dog can't break. Part of why the Boston section can drag, as the game first settles in, has gotta be because this opening is so good, and so tough to let go of.

Troy Motherfucking Baker

I'm immediately struck by how perfect Troy Baker is as Joel. It's the right role performed by the right guy. Troy also played Bioshock: Infinite's Booker DeWitt, and I never cared about that guy at all. I didn't buy into him, I didn't believe in his struggle. None of his words resonated with me. We were told a lot about his troubled past, and his alcoholism, but there was nothing about the character that really rang true.

On the other hand, everything Joel says, I buy into. Every line is his best line. This seems like a real guy.

The Opening Cinematic

One thing I love about The Last Of Us is that every time I play, I notice something new. This time, I notice the first line of the game, when Joel comes through his front door, talking on the phone.

"Tommy, I-...Tommy. Tommy, listen to me. He's the contractor, okay? I can't lose this job. I understand... Let's talk about this in the morning, okay? We'll talk about it in the morning. Alright, goodnight."

I never thought about that phone call too hard. I just took it as generalized banter about

money-problems. But looking at it again, it sounds like Joel's brother Tommy is trying to coerce Joel. Maybe Tommy caught the contractor up to something shady, and he wants Joel to back him up in confronting the guy. But Joel doesn't care about that; Joel just wants the job. That would be in line with what we see of their respective characters later on -- Tommy wants to do the right thing, and Joel just wants to survive.

Joel got home just before midnight, and Sarah gives him his birthday watch.

Latchkey Kids

Growing up in the Eighties, it wasn't weird for my parents not to be home during the afternoon. I could go off and do whatever I wanted without telling anybody. People who grew up in the Seventies often have stories of being basically left to their own devices.

Leaving kids home alone has become much less common, and by 2013 standards, Joel leaving his daughter alone in an empty house could be seen as a bit negligent.

Male Approach To Parenting

When I was in my late twenties, my cousin had sole custody of his toddler daughter. I moved in with them for a year, to help with the household. At first it was pretty daunting -- I'd never had the sense that looking after a kid was something I could do. Girls read books called "The Babysitters Club", which I can only assume contain grand adventures couched with babysitting tips. My Fighting Fantasy books had little babysitting content to speak of.

The surprise turn of events is that we did pretty great. The kid later moved in with her grandparents, and that was a more stable overall situation. But ultimately, I was really proud of our child-raising skills.

That being said, having two guys running things did give the household a fairly relaxed attitude. We looked after that kid in the same way that people had looked after us: As long as you don't kill yourself, you'll be fine. You'll be able to shake off whatever little trouble you get into.

Maybe something similar happened with Joel. Maybe he relaxed his parenting, and everything was fine. So he relaxed it a little more, and a little more. And after awhile, coming home at midnight is just something that would happen.

The Outbreak

Sarah falls asleep watching tv, and Joel takes her to her bed. She awakens later that night, to the sound of a phone ringing. "Uncle Tommy?"

Stating Names

Characters saying each other's names is a pet peeve of mine. It's usually a pretty clunky way of presenting a character's name, but it seems okay here. I think it's the delivery that saves it, but I also buy it more because the characters are from the southern United States. Allow me to explain.

In Canada, we don't say each other's names. Unless there are a gang of people in a room, and we really need to clarify who we're talking to, it just doesn't happen. If two Canadians were stuck on a deserted island together, they'd probably never hear their own name spoken again.

My information about the southern U.S. is limited, but I once dated a girl from down south. She found it odd that I rarely said her name, and told me she liked having it said. Whereas to my Canadian tongue, saying her name felt like I was inside a bad movie, so I rarely did it. It's a shame, too, because we were totally compatible in every other way. Well, easy come, easy go.

So, based on that single anecdote, I bequeath all instances of southern characters saying each other's names a papal pass. No need to thank me. I'm just doing my fake job that I made up.

Dialect

I wonder how good the southern dialect is in *The Last Of Us*? It's not something I can accurately gauge. To me, *Firefly* and *Preacher* sound authentic as fuck, but people from the South say they're clunky. I guess it's similar to when a Canadian makes an appearance on a tv show -- It's not generally a very graceful portrayal. I don't know where Neil Druckmann is from, but he did go to Florida State. And Florida counts as the South to me.

Having Troy Baker as lead actor probably also helped, as he's from Texas. There's nothing like having a native around to smooth out some cliches, and to keep the dialogue generally grounded.

Incidentally, I would like to re-iterate that no one should ever, ever play Heavy Rain in English. In fact, most games are better played with only subtitles. Just because some awful voices are supplied doesn't mean you've gotta accept them, and let them ruin an otherwise perfectly presentable video game. I'm looking at you, guy-who-misdelivers-every-sentence-out-of-Guybrush-Threepwood's-mouth.

Guybrush Threepwood

A lot of people like the dude who voices Guybrush Threepwood, but I've always hated his nerdy performance. To me, Guybrush Threepwood is supposed to be cool.

That's the trick with Guybrush Threepwood: Here's this cool adventurer, doing cool stuff and saying cool shit. But nobody *treats* him like he's cool. The other characters all act like Guybrush is the biggest idiot in the world, and I always thought that was an interesting aspect of early Monkey Island games -- If nobody treats you like you're cool, then what does being cool really mean? Is it worth anything to say a clever line, if nobody else thinks it's clever?

This is probably not a common view of Guybrush Threepwood. But I really never thought of him as a loser. If anything, he became even cooler in Monkey Island 2, with his cool beard and his cool coat. However, Dominic Armato, who I'm sure is a very nice person, delivers every line like Guybrush is an awkward, gawky idiot. I fucking hate it.

Luckily, there is an easy fix. If you turn off the sound, and just read the dialogue, then taa-daa! The jokes are funny again, and Guybrush is cool again! Suddenly, it's Monkey Island!

Playing As Sarah

On Sarah's wall is the photo from her soccer game, which will later resurface at Tommy's power plant. There's a baseball bat next to her nightstand. Sarah's definitely a tomboy.

I love the Dawn Of The Wolf posters that show up everywhere. If the world ends, that's how it'll be -- Whatever dumb movie was out at the time will be what you see everywhere. It's similar to watching footage from September 11th, 2001, and always seeing posters for Zoolander. That stupid fucking movie has been frozen in history.

One of Sarah's stickers says "Adjascent Hazard". That's not a very good band name. They don't sound like they rock.

While I'm examining Sarah's walls, she stretches, yawns and rubs her eyes in a way that looks pretty convincing. We've come a long way from Sonic tapping his foot. Not that that wasn't super edgy and awesome.

Looking around Sarah's room reminds me of The Fullbright Company's *Gone Home* -- The rooms in Joel and Sarah's house definitely tell a story. Someone took the time to design all these posters, and most people probably never looked at them too closely. I know I hadn't, on my previous playthroughs. This is one fun aspect of writing about a game; it's an excuse to stop, and to really look at all the little details.

Joel And Ellie's Last Names

Sarah has an achievement certificate with a ribbon, and the ribbon covers up her last name. Apparently the Japanese manual lists the characters as "Joel Miller" and "Ellie Williams". Naughty Dog confirmed that those were early names, and that officially, Joel, Sarah and Ellie are single-named characters. I kind of like it better that way. Something about "Ellie Williams" feels oddly generic, in a way that a first name alone doesn't.

The Dark Hallway

Leaving Sarah's room and walking through the empty house definitely evokes the feeling of being a kid at night. If anything, it should be even darker. As a kid, I could navigate my whole house in the dark, but the journey to find a light switch always felt pretty freaky.

The newspaper in the bathroom says September 26th. Assuming it's from that morning, September 26th must be Joel's birthday.

There are a couple of unaccounted for people in photographs around the house. There's a guy I don't recognize, and some girls around Sarah's age. There are no pictures of a wife -- She's probably been gone awhile, and I'm guessing she left Joel, rather than having died. Had she died, there would probably be pictures.

Joel's opening phone conversation with Tommy suggests that he's financially flailing. But on a side table in the hall there's a book that reads, "Everything you need to know about creating a startup". Joel may have had some bigger plans.

Joel's Room

There's light coming from Joel's room, and Sarah heads in. The news report on the tv shows chaos happening in the city, and there's a sudden explosion in the distance, visible outside the window. The "press L3 to look at something noteworthy" mechanic rears its head.

The "pressing L3" function doesn't always work for me. I'm often busy looking at something else, and by the time I press L3 it's a second too late to see what the game was trying to show me. In some situations, maybe pulling camera control from the player would be better. If there was an explosion outside the window, my character's head would naturally whip toward it, so losing camera control would probably feel alright.

The same book about creating a startup is in Joel's room. Don't buy multiple copies of books, Joel. Every dollar counts.

What's with the painting of wild stallions in Joel's room? I guess he knows what he likes. No one's gonna keep you down, Joel. You'll be wild and free, forever.

Heading Downstairs

After the explosion outside, Sarah's body language changes. She seems much more on edge. If this were Indigo Prophecy, she could play the guitar that's downstairs to regain some composure. But without that mechanic, she remains stressed.

The startup book is on the downstairs coffee table as well. I felt like a big detective when I first spied that book in the hallway, but I'm realizing that Joel's house is not intended for this level of scrutiny. To be fair, the Gone Home house had way too many empty binders. So, nobody's perfect.

The house is surprisingly lo-fi for 2013 -- There's a CD player with a tape deck, and a VCR. This really is like the Gone Home house. Though I had a VCR in my old apartment, because sometimes you need to watch weird old shit. Maybe Joel just wants to watch I Was A Teenage Werewolf, but it was never released on DVD. He and Sarah aren't so different.

There's a picture of Joel with Sarah as a toddler, but still no wife to be seen. She must have left very early on.

Apocalypse... Now!

Joel comes barging into the house, followed by goddamn zombie Jimmy Cooper, who won't fuck off, causing Joel to shoot the crazy bastard. The apocalypse is officially underway.

Joel and Sarah run out the front of the house, where Tommy is waiting, and they all climb into his SUV. Joel's neighbor two doors down is packing up a hatchback, but nobody talks to him. Maybe he was a jerk. A regular Jimmy Cooper, I bet.

Riding In The Back Seat

Sarah observing from the SUV's backseat is genius. Looking around at what's going down, listening to the adults talking -- It really hearkens back to what it was like to be a kid. The "descent into chaos" montage from 2004's Dawn Of The Dead was my previous favorite apocalypse simulation, but The Last Of Us gives it a run for its money.

A family on the roadside tries to flag down Joel and Tommy; it's been said that Joel's insistence on ignoring them speaks to his ignoble character, and the cruelties he will later be capable of. But it does take some wind out of his decision to see that there's a traffic jam just up the road. That family only needs to walk over a bridge, and they'll be as far as Joel coulda taken them.

Crash!

Houses are on fire, people are freaking out, and as we approach a more populated area a car suddenly slams into the side of Tommy's vehicle. Sarah's leg is hurt, and we now take control of Joel, climbing from the overturned SUV and getting attacked by an Infected dickhead. Tommy comes to the rescue, introducing us to the secretly most powerful weapon in the game -- The brick. Nothing can stop a brick. Except a Bloater, or a flailing Clicker. But still, bricks are real good.

Joel carries Sarah, and we get to running.

Setting Paths

Designing a path for a player to follow must be a tough job. The first time I played The Last Of Us, I realized immediately to go down an alleyway, but went too soon. I had to wait for Tommy to direct me to a place where I already was. But watching other people

play, the path is not so evident. They're running into fires, barreling headlong into throngs of zombies... A game developer's life must be filled with a lot of tongue-biting concerning the common sense levels of their fellow human beings.

Valve are considered masters of directing players, but I got lost in every Half Life game I ever played. I got so lost that I was just running around an empty level, hating my life. No matter how good a path you set, you've gotta accept that a couple hundred thousand idiots are gonna misunderstand everything you arranged, quit your game, and question why everybody likes Half Life 2 so much.

Sarah

On their way out of the city, a soldier who was ordered to hold a perimeter fires at Joel and Sarah, and Sarah doesn't make it. I apologize for the curt retelling, but there's really nothing I can say to do justice to how heart wrenching this scene is. Characters dying in video games has been a mainstay since Final Fantasy II on the SNES, but this is definitely one of the rougher ones.

Sensitivity

As I said before, I think a person's particular sensitivities can often dictate what level of care they achieve with their art. If you can't envision a particular artistic goal, particularly a complex one, you're not gonna stumble upon it by accident.

Acting in video games is one such example. It's usually bad, but not purposefully so. Some producers didn't hire Male Shepard as a joke. They hired him because they didn't know how bad he is. The video game industry is filled with tin ears.

This stuff is all relative -- I clearly think I've got a good enough ear to mock and belittle the decisions of others, despite having no experience in the field. But Neil Druckmann's sensitivity in such matters is much more quantifiable.

There's a story in *Grounded: The Making Of The Last Of Us*, about the multitude of retakes the team did while recording Sarah's death scene. Troy Baker said he was sure he had nailed the scene -- Sobbing, having a breakdown, and delivering what he considered some of the best acting of his career.

Had I been in charge, I'm sure I would have stopped there. Any of us would have. In a scene about a dying kid, a big, emotional performance seems appropriate. But Druckmann called the actors back, and had Troy play the scene again, giving a quieter

performance. The earlier takes didn't feel perfect to him, so he didn't stop. That story impresses the hell out of me. Despite everyone's hard work, Druckmann felt that he needed a little more, and that eye for quality really describes The Last Of Us as a whole.

But Druckmann's not some jerk director, exerting his will and making everyone around him miserable -- By all accounts, he's a real nice guy. As I get older, I'm starting to realize that talent, or lack thereof, is not necessarily the biggest roadblock to a project. Being able to collaborate without stepping on other people's toes is the truly difficult task. Guys like Neil Druckmann, who have a very clear vision, but who can also successfully lead a team to achieve that vision -- That seems pretty admirable.

Sarah's death also sets the tone for all of the game's storytelling. It demonstrates that the emotional beats will be appropriate to the character, even if that means a reaction being smaller than might be expected. A quieter performance can sometimes carry a larger impact, and that philosophy carries all the way to the final scene.

Opening Credits

The music in this game is so good. I know that's not a very insightful comment, but come on. It's fucking great.

Musical Sparseness and The Road

Finding a subtle score in anything is hard. I mentioned how sound bothers me very easily, but here, the music never grates.

The Last Of Us is compared often to The Road. The Road is a good example of how movies can really distill the weaknesses in a story. In a novel, details about the larger world are easy for the reader to fill in themselves, but having the literal nuts and bolts of the story laid out visually causes its unreality to become apparent. The Road, in film, is like a cartoon apocalypse. It's so bleak that it feels like two characters walking through a metaphor, rather than inhabiting a real world.

Yet, despite the incredible sparseness of the visuals, the filmmakers could not cool out with the music. Man and Son hear sounds in the distance. They hide, and tension mounts. Then, a gang of raiders crest the hill, to an ENORMOUS SWELL OF MUSIC.

We're a pretty media-savvy generation. I can scarcely imagine the contortions future nerds will have to go through just to tell a joke. But musical swells like that practically offend me. It feels like my grandpa tapping me on the shoulder and saying, "Now see,

son, this here situation, it's scary. Those men are probably dangerous. That fella, and his son... They're real nervous. They're nervous about seeing those other men."

"I KNOW, GRANDPA! Will you get out of here? Stop trying to tell me what's going on through the medium of a bombastic film score! What is this, Lawrence of fucking Arabia? They're in an apocalypse! It's scary! I get it! Fuck!!"

Then grandpa starts crying at my outburst. I don't mean to make an old man cry. But this shit has gotta stop.

In *The Last Of Us*, this shit has totally stopped. It's surprising to listen to the soundtrack and realize how few immediately recognizable tracks there are. The whole thing is pretty sparse, and very carefully integrated. When the music does swell up, it always complements the situation, and never smothers it.

Video Game Music

In the 8-bit era, I really loved video game music. The limitations of technology led to some really amazing stuff. A composer's task was to create short music loops that could be listened to for long periods, and when they pulled it off, they really knocked it out of the park.

In the 16-bit era, there are still a lot of classic tunes. But the increased complexity makes those songs stick less in my mind. From then on, the whole paradigm shifted. With CD audio, video game music just became music. It became generic, something that usually faded into the background. Video game music is now more about tone than specific melody, so *The Last Of Us*' sparse implementation works well.

Introduction Of The Fireflies

The references to the Fireflies in these opening credits always felt a bit ham-fisted. On a micro story level, a young girl has just died in front of us. On a macro level, the world is entirely collapsing. At neither of those levels does some dorky group called "The Fireflies" feel relevant in the slightest. Their introduction does not feel very organic, and seems much more like a plot contrivance being foisted upon the player.

I heard that these opening credits were a later addition to *The Last Of Us*. In earlier versions, the story cut directly from Sarah's death to "20 Years Later" in Boston. Players found it jarring, so the credit sequence was added, and I do like it. It's very visually beautiful, and some downtime after Sarah's death is a good idea. I can see where the

impulse came from, to plant some seeds about the Fireflies within the credits. But it might have been better to focus on the apocalypse itself, and let the Fireflies be revealed once we were more firmly entrenched in the story.

Fuckin' Fireflies

I always felt vaguely opposed to the Fireflies, right from the start. "Their public charter calls for the return of all branches of government." Get the fuck out of here, Fireflies. What a bunch of wankers. Whenever Joel gives them a sarcastic rebuke, or a light stabbing, I tend to be on his side.

Incidentally, who is giving the news reports during the opening credits? In a world where most branches of government have dissolved, what kind of lunatic is still broadcasting in an old-world, phony baloney newscaster voice? Maybe it's a cable access basement-dweller, doing broadcasts for their stuffed animals. They report on the Fireflies, check in with the traffic cam, then take a shotgun and sign out forever. Here's Tom with the weather. Ch-chk, BOOM! The Last Of Us: UHF DLC.

20 Years Later: Boston

The "20 Years Later" title is so great. It's like a sudden slap. We knew the game took place at some point in the future, but that's a big jump.

Time Skipping

Skipping forward in time is a storytelling technique that *The Last Of Us* takes great advantage of. After a big event, the story tends to cut to black, rather than showing its ramifications directly. That can really help difficult, emotional scenes feel more believable, as we use our own experiences to imagine how the characters are being affected.

This first jump forward is the grand daddy -- Henry's death, or David's death, have an effect on the characters. But the words "20 Years Later" tell you a lot about Joel. In a world where almost nobody made it, Joel survived. The more we see what the world has become, the more weight those twenty years carry. In a world where you literally cannot survive without breaking every moral law of the old world, Joel has not only broken them -- He's good at it. He's so good at surviving that he almost seems comfortable. You don't come across a lotta old men in this world, and Joel is one of the oldest.

Speaking of age, Joel seems older in this cutscene than anywhere else in the game. I'm always a little taken aback by the change. Maybe that's all it is, just the shock of transition. But it really does seem like he's got more grey hair here than he does anywhere else.

Assuming Joel's birthday was September 26th, then we're picking up the next day, September 27th. Twenty years later.

I assumed Joel got drunk on his birthday -- Tess chides him for wanting to be alone, and I reckoned he sat around and drank while he mourned the past. But that booze bottle is pretty full. It could be a second bottle. Or maybe Joel's a sipper.

Societal Collapse

I always question, in apocalypse scenarios, why human beings haven't gotten their shit together yet. Organizing communities is what we do.

When I was in elementary school, we organized an elaborate work project during recess, where we would inefficiently try to redirect rainwater into the teacher's parking lot. We tried to flood that parking lot for months, under the impression that they would then

have to cancel school. We were just too dumb to know that it would never work.

But that organizational impulse is evident everywhere. If you look at cities from an airplane, they look like computer chips. Organizing each other is what we *do*. Any plague, any calamity would only be a temporary setback. We can't help but rebuild. That's the kind of creature we are. I always liked how, in latter-timeline Romero movies, society is actually coming back together. Unless the human race is utterly, *utterly* destroyed, rebirth is inevitable.

I do find the extended collapse in *The Last Of Us* a bit easier to accept, because of the brutality of the cordyceps spores. The airborne nature of the infection, the speed and violence of the Infected, and the instant kill of the Clickers all help sell the idea that human beings can't get back on their feet. They just can't stand up to this level of battery.

Boston

One might question the logic of staying in a major city, in the event of a zombie apocalypse. I didn't, but I heard someone mention it on a podcast somewhere, and it's not a bad point. You wouldn't sleep next to a mattress infested with bedbugs.

The old-world significance of major cities could be part of it. But a smaller city or town seems like a far better place to try to defend. Given the number of potential corpses spread throughout the city, trying to clear the place seems like a bit of a fool's errand.

Probs With Rob

Tess tells Joel that their shitty partner Robert has been shitty, and that they've gotta get Robert before Robert gets them. It really is jarring to go from Sarah's death and a worldwide catastrophe, straight to... problems with Robert. Who the fuck is Robert? Why should I give a shit about him?

The first time I played *The Last Of Us*, I definitely felt a change in the pressure at this point. These days, I find the Boston section delightful. But my initial lack of enthusiasm came down to three things.

Number One! Early game tutorializing! Perhaps a necessary evil, but an evil nonetheless.

Number Two! An uncompelling goal. I repeat: Who the fuck is Robert? Does anyone care about him? Where is Robert's mother? Somebody ask her if she cares about him.

Number Three! The realization of how mechanical and systems-driven the game would be.

These are all first-playthrough problems. None of these things are issues for me anymore. In particular, I came to greatly appreciate the gameyness of The Last Of Us, and the strongly mechanical nature of its gameplay. But it is a very distinct shift from the opening. Initially, I wanted more of that. I didn't want to worry about ammunition, and taking cover. I wanted another pure hit of that sweet, sweet story. So the pursuit of Robert dragged a bit.

The Boston Streets

Tess and Joel head out into the suckiness of Boston, walking past some acquaintances. Wooden NPCs in games can really grate on me, like the citizens of Columbia at the start of Bioshock: Infinite. They stand stock still, they only speak when the player approaches.

But I wonder: Is my perplexed disappointment over Bioshock: Infinite causing me to be hypocritical? Because these randoes in The Last Of Us really aren't so different from the Infinite NPCs. They stand still, and only talk when you approach. But here, it doesn't bother me.

Probably, I'm just a fickle mush head. But the difference may be because The Last Of Us enforces a slower pace during exploratory sections. Joel is forced into a slow walk, so when he's stopped from running into a stationary NPC, it doesn't seem jarring. It just seems like something Joel would naturally do.

In my old whipping boy Bioshock: Infinite, I was running around at top speed, and the civilians would bring me to a dead stop, like they were made of concrete. The Last Of Us has an I-can-meet-it-in-the-middle level of artificiality.

The enforced walking for this first stretch is also kind of neat, 'cause the walk animation is one you don't see much. The way Joel walks looks so goddamn good. Take that however you want. I'm just immediately buying into this whole experience. I'm big time in! Goddamn, I love The Last Of Us. If you were looking for an objective dissertation on this game, or any other game, you ain't gonna find it here.

We walk past a line of people on their knees, hands behind their heads, who guards are testing for infection. If you mess with the guards, they push you down. If you do it again, you get shot in the head. Nice. It reminds me of old Sierra adventure games, where if you look at *anything* even slightly cock-eyed, you're dead.

Naughty Dog games are famous for having no loading screens... unless you die. Adding that percentage indicator on the loading screen wasn't such a bad idea, 'cause this game really does take forever to load.

Dialogue Volume

It may be realistic for dialogue to sound muffled when there's distance or obstructions between the characters, but I kinda wish they had let that realism slide. It's fine for enemy barks to be indistinct, but I'm never gonna not want to hear what my friends are saying. It makes staying near your partner an inadvertent and not very fun game mechanic. I'm surprised, whenever I have subtitles turned on, how much dialogue I'm losing to the fuzz of distance.

Listen Mode

Because I only had Listen Mode available during my first playthrough, it now seems a little bizarre that it was ever a thing. I think they did a good job with Listen Mode, but after being without it, the whole notion seems very unreal.

During my second playthrough, on Survivor difficulty, I kept waiting for a Listen Mode tutorial to happen, but it never came. The game works completely fine without it; the third person camera is more than enough to be able to peek around corners and keep tabs on your enemies. Without Listen Mode, the overall sense of reality and immersion feels greater, and ratchets the tension up in a nice way.

If you do insist on playing with Listen Mode -- which, come on, stop being such a little wuss -- you should definitely not upgrade it. Fully powered super-listening can start revealing seams in the game, allowing you to see enemies appear or disappear as they're loaded in or out of memory. I heard that Listen Mode was a relatively late addition to the game, and things like that seem to support that idea. Listen Mode is definitely best left behind after a playthrough or two.

Involuntary Movement

Our couch is quite far from our tv, so I'll often play games while standing near the screen. For a game like Red Dead Redemption, I love letting the screen fill my whole field of vision. I can kind of imagine that I'm there, like flat VR. In Red Dead in particular, it can feel amazingly effective, staring out at the massive, dusty vistas of the Old West. It helps not to play any missions -- Killing sixty natives in cold blood without

breaking a sweat has a way of hurting the simulation.

I also like to play The Last Of Us while standing in front of the tv, and being that dialed in to an experience can lead to some involuntary body movements. Without Listen Mode, I keep raising onto my toes, trying to see over walls. If I can't quite look around corners, my real-life head will move to the side. I can't remember doing that so consistently since I first played Wolfenstein 3D, trying to dodge my head away from gunfire.

My Dad And Doom

I remember when my Dad played Doom on PC, he was obsessed with not letting enemies get the drop on him. He would bring up a wireframe map of the level, which showed the position of all the enemies. Then, before opening any door, he'd study the map and decide the best way to clear the room.

At the time, I thought of it as just an old guy cheating at video games. He was diluting the purity of the Doom twitch-fest! But looking back, that was actually pretty cool. He was playing a tactical strategy version of Doom.

I also just realized that my Dad was playing a self-devised variant of Doom, the same way that I'm playing a self-devised variant of The Last Of Us. Like father, like son. Except that my variant is way harder, you cheatin' old bastard.

Area 5 Checkpoint

Walking toward the Area 5 checkpoint, one building on the horizon is leaning against another. I think that's the building where we first meet Clickers. I take a moment to gander. I really love being in this world. The vibe, the feeling -- I was a big fan of the Fallout 3 apocalypse, but I think this is my new fave.

I wonder if Area 5 is named after the video production team who made the Grounded documentary? Those are the guys who used to do the 1-Up Show. I like those guys.

As Joel and Tess are about to pass through the checkpoint, there's an explosion. Fireflies! In the ensuing panic, Area 5 is shut down.

God Damn Fireflies

In the American Dreams prequel comic, the Fireflies set off another big explosion, for

some goddamn reason. They sure do love blowing stuff up. The military may not be great, but I'm not clear about what the plan would be without them. Do the Fireflies really think they have an infrastructure capable of filling that void?

It kinda bugs me when people identify the Fireflies as the de facto good guys. I think those people watched too much Star Wars as kids, so they naturally side with the rebels. But in virtually all scenarios, the rebels are short-sighted, murdering assholes.

I'm sure there are plenty of examples of the Military abusing their position in the Quarantine Zones which we don't get to see. But under the circumstances, the Military's harshness seems somewhat justified. During our walk to the checkpoint, one of the lined up detainees is found to be infected, and is immediately killed. That's incredibly harsh, but what other choice is there? I'd be sad to see my friend killed, but I'd be more sad to see him bite my balls, and turn them into zombie balls. 'Cause then you get a zombie dick, and then a zombie face, and then you're a zombie. So think about that, *Fireflies*.

Tutorials

During each playthrough, I see the tutorial prompt that says pressing down and X will make Joel do a 180 degree turn. I always think that I should try using it, and then I promptly forget that it's a thing. But during this playthrough I'll try it out! Guaranteed!

A catch-22 of tutorials is that by the time their lessons become useful, they've often been long forgotten. But if the game keeps doling out tutorials over a long period of time, they become exasperating. It starts to feel like a game has training wheels that never come off.

Another tricky aspect of tutorials is that even if their advice is helpful, I have a hard time internalizing it. I really only learn by doing. Three of the Last Of Us tutorials stress that when things go badly, running and hiding is a good strategy. That surprises me to see, because that's really good advice, but it's something I only realized after learning it on my own.

After I realized how crucial it is to run away during combat, the game really opened up. These tutorials are well meaning, but hopeless. If I haven't listened to anyone in my real life, be they teacher, clergyman, lover, or all of the above, I sure won't listen to some smart-ass video game tutorial. It's nothing against you, Last Of Us. I'm just a poor student.

Running

I like that combat in The Last Of Us encourages running. A lot of games allow for a lot of bullet-sponging, and having to run away from overwhelming odds makes a lot more sense. If people are shooting at you, then *run*, dude. I was proud to have discovered the strategy.

In life, discovering lessons for oneself is always the better way to learn, and that's doubly true in video games. There's a controller in your hand, you're constantly making direct decisions; your mind couldn't be farther from ready to absorb passive information. Tutorials could definitely use better ways of integrating into games.

Maybe during the downtime, Tess and Joel could talk about their respective strategies for killin'.

"Hey Joel, I notice that you run away a lot."

"That's because I don't wanna die, *Tess*. This ain't some Uncharted game."

"I know it's not! That world is gone!"

"It sure is. There ain't been a PlayStation for nigh on twenty years. Twenty long, cold years."

That dialogue could probably use a punch up. But if they were gonna have that conversation, I'm guess they've had it already.

Far Cry 3 And Rigid Tutorials

One irony of tutorials is that I often find them the most difficult part of a game. Never does a game design become more narrow and frustrating than when it's aggressively trying to teach something. Do this, and do only this, or you may not proceed.

Early in Far Cry 3, you have to skin some animals, then fast-travel back to camp. I try to avoid fast-traveling, especially early in a game. I want to try to build a sense of a cohesive, interconnected world.

So I skinned these critters, jumped in a jeep and started barreling over a hill. A prompt told me I could choose to fast-travel from the map screen. Good to know. Then I started getting warnings that I was leaving the mission area, and I suddenly failed the mission.

So I went all the way back to the critters, skinned them, and jumped in the jeep. This time I stayed on the road that goes straight back to camp. And I failed again. That time I was livid. What the hell was going on in this stupid fucking game? I was just trying to get through this tutorial shit! And incidentally, I lose my temper pretty fast.

I then realized that after skinning the animals, everything around me became an out-of-bounds zone. I would always fail, unless I teleported back to camp. The game was literally forcing me to fast-travel.

Far Cry 3: I KNOW WHAT FAST-TRAVEL IS. I'VE PLAYED A GOD DAMN VIDEO GAME BEFORE. YOU UNBELIEVABLE PRICK.

That tutorial may have been well meaning... I guess... but it was crazily rigid. The developers could not imagine a world in which I already knew how to fast-travel, and their attempt to make sure I knew became a bizarre torment.

Unfortunately, that tutorial was teaching me a lot about that game. Running around the island, attacking outposts, hunting sharks, making my own fun -- I've rarely had more fun fucking around than in Far Cry 3. But trying to navigate my way through the narrow, rigid story missions, where any deviation from the intended path meant failure, has rarely been less fun. It was like playing two different games, which had almost nothing to do with each other. In situations like that, I do not envy game reviewers. Far Cry 3 was somehow an A+ and an F at the same time.

Joel's First Bandage

Speaking of tutorials, Joel is forced to use the health kit Tess gives him after the explosion. He'll just stand there until you break that bad boy out. I tried only applying the bandage halfway, so I could save it for later, since health packs will be rare in the Super Apocalypse. But no dice.

Now that the checkpoint is shut down, Tess and Joel make their way through an old building, an alternate route to Area 5. The game roadblocks me until I pick up Joel's backpack and pistol, but that's reasonable -- I can't play the whole game without a backpack.

The pistol has four bullets, and I'm gonna try to save them for the Bloater in the school gym. I might even have to pick up some extra ammo, unless Bill will throw me some. Or, maybe that fight will go fine. But I'm a mother, I worry.

Inventory

Joel's inventory becomes more and more improbable as the game progresses, particularly once he's carting around a home-made flame thrower. But in general, I think the backpack system is really cool. Joel's pack isn't really big enough, it should probably be more of a hockey bag. But it generally makes sense.

I won't be doing much item manipulation during this playthrough, because Joel's backpack will be mostly empty. But I love the real-time inventory system. Having to dig through a bag in the middle of a gunfight is a fun mechanic, and a lot more immersive than just opening an inventory menu.

Learning About Ladders

There's a little triangle prompt to boost Tess up a wall -- I initially found that prompt hard to find, since it's above eye level. In one of the developer commentaries for Portal, they mention that getting players to look up is a hard thing to do. I'm not sure why that is, but it seems to be true.

Tess and Joel continue through the dilapidated buildings, with the help of some ladder tutorials. People are really down on all the ladder and pallet puzzles in The Last Of Us, but they don't bother me. At least they're easy. I really hate when a game stops me dead to do a complicated puzzle.

If the game is all about puzzles, like Portal or Braid, then that's all good. But if my mind is not in puzzle-solving mode, the shift is really unbearable. The puzzles in Uncharted 3 fuck with me every time. I'm running around, having fun, throwing grenades at dudes, and suddenly I've gotta sit down and do some homework. In comparison, a practical task like moving a ladder is fine.

The camera movement in this game is really great. It lends a sense of motion and impact to whatever Joel's doing. If you fall a long distance, Joel spends a moment on his hands and knees, as the camera jars a bit. It takes a moment to the camera to re-establish itself, and it works well to convey the sense of having the wind knocked out of you.

Jumping

The Last Of Us uses context-sensitive jumping -- Joel can vault over objects, or climb up small walls. But if you press the jump button while Joel is standing in a field, he won't do shit. He's not just gonna *jump* for no goddamn reason, and I like that.

As games have become more realistic, jumping has become increasingly odd. Massive vertical leaps are the domain of Super Mario, or certain old-timey versions of Superman. But Joel's not doing any rocket-jumps. His clambering is strictly utilitarian.

It's hard not to notice when jumping doesn't match the rest of a game's aesthetic. While testing the buttons in the 2013 Tomb Raider, I jumped Lara straight up and down a few times, and she looked like a bizarre rabbit person. Her running leap was fine, but her standing leap was ridiculous, and didn't serve any gameplay purpose.

In Bioshock: Infinite, after climbing from the rowboat, the first thing I did was jump. Booker hopped in the air, like a box on a spring, and the screen gave a little shake as he landed. That screen-jitter made me smirk. It didn't feel like the carefully choreographed camera of The Last Of Us. It felt like silly, legacy bullshit. Having a jump button for no reason is probably something that oughta go. I shouldn't be grinning within moments of starting an ostensibly serious game.

Scavenging

I've heard people say they find Joel's scavenging distracting. A character will be trying to have a conversation, while Joel is crouched in a corner, picking up a pile of tiny gears. If nothing else, it's an example of how video game fans will complain about literally anything.

But I like Joel's scavenging. Not only are supplies scarce, but I like to think that surviving an apocalypse has given Joel survivalism OCD. A real life example is Vladek Spiegelman, from the graphic novel *Maus*. Vladek survived World War 2, and became pathologically obsessed with thrift. During the war, his life had been saved by small, seemingly inconsequential objects. So in his later life, nothing could go to waste.

I think of Joel in the same way -- He compulsively checks every drawer, as every item could mean the difference between life or death. It's how his brain is wired, and there's no convincing him otherwise. So his companions can only stand by and watch as he compulsively scavenges.

That being said, during this itemless playthrough, I'll be imagining the opposite: This version of Joel won't even bother opening drawers, because he doesn't recognize their contents as valuable. He might find a room full of supplies, but he'll act as though the room is empty. For he can see no hope! He walks the world with only the clothes on his back, and whatever items people put directly in his hands. The apocalypse may have happened to the world, but the Super Apocalypse... why, that apocalypse happened... inside of his heart.

If enough people want to give me writing awards, I'll open a P.O. Box to accommodate their delivery. Just let me know.

Scarcity

Speaking of scavenging, the absurd scarcity of items on Survivor difficulty is what inspired this itemless playthrough. So let's rap about that, shan't we?

My stupidly high, fifty-percent-melee-kills stat led me to realize that I didn't mind having limited ammunition. After spending enough time punching and choking, Joel's guns take on a kind of "secret weapon" feeling; I could pull out a gun in a pinch, but I rarely felt like I needed to.

Weapon and pill upgrades certainly seemed unnecessary. I had (of course) read complaints about the weapon sway in The Last Of Us, but I think it makes things feel more natural. Joel is a pretty old guy; his arms *should* sway. A character with steely, perfect aim can feel offputting.

Far Cry 2, of all games, has razor-perfect aim. My character had malaria, for christ's sake! A little weapon sway would be appropriate. Not that I'm complaining; in Far Cry 2, you need all the help you can get. It's just weird, is all.

The scarcity of items on Survivor starts to seem funny, after awhile. Joel will eagerly open a drawer, only to stand there dumbly, staring at nothing. He does it again and again. Maybe this next drawer... nope! Shiv doors become particularly demoralizing, containing such depressingly small hauls that I eventually stopped caring whether I opened them or not.

Being item-deprived also made it evident how often The Last Of Us will fudge a player's inventory. Missed items will often re-appear in a later location, and support characters will give Joel ammo or health when he's low. Even during solo sections, Joel will often respawn at a checkpoint with more health than he had originally. There's a lot going on under the hood to keep the player on edge, without actually letting the situation slip into full hopelessness.

So, playing The Last Of Us with successively fewer items, and using guns less and less often, the question eventually became: Did I need any of this stuff at all? Survivor difficulty is already an itemless wasteland; could Joel make his way through the entire game with only his base stats, and his two fightin' fists?

I tried to mentally walk my way through the game, to imagine where I might really *need*

items. As I mentioned, I wasn't sure if I'd have enough inventory to kill the High School Bloater. I'd certainly have to gather items to fight the Winter Bloater, since Ellie's inventory is basically just a bunch of joke books and a broken Walkman.

But besides those couple of choke points, I felt pretty confident that I could do it. Like the first person to climb Everest, I felt simultaneously motivated and suicidal. Fuck the world! Fuck it! You can't stop me! So let's do this! The Last Of Us: Naked Attack! That'll be the Region 3 title for this book.

Stunt Gaming

The idea of playing The Last Of Us without picking up items is obviously a stunt: It makes for an easy hook to describe this book, and also an easy way to characterize myself as a moron. I don't recommend anyone actually try this method, since it ignores a lot of the mechanics that make The Last Of Us great.

But I didn't want to examine The Last Of Us from a purely plot-driven perspective. The gameplay is an important part of the game's story, and I'd reached a point where the mechanics felt too familiar. I was breezing through encounters, knowing where the edges of the simulation were. I could be sloppy and still survive.

My first playthrough of The Last Of Us felt oppressive -- After scraping through an encounter, my gut would sink at the sound of more enemies in the distance. The experience really wore me out, which is a feeling that video games don't often deliberately explore.

I think that sense of desperation was intended, and it really helps illustrate Joel's world, both inner and outer. For a proper dissection of The Last Of Us, I wanted to bring back the feeling of being constantly, endlessly fucked. The theory is that having no items will force me to really focus on each encounter, and to regain a sense of scarcity as I salivate over every abandoned health kit.

The Outskirts

Joel and Tess make their way through an old building full of beds, with names and hand prints painted on the wall. Interspersed are messages like "*Don't go south*," "*Shoot first*," "*Take my advice -- stay on the other side of the wall*." It's revealed, through a found letter, that the Infected we're about to encounter were people who were trying to get inside the Boston QZ. As bad as things are in Boston, they're apparently worse outside.

I don't know how widespread a problem the Infected are in the world at large. Are they everywhere, or are there just pockets of monsters? It doesn't seem *crazy* bad, from what we see in the rest of the game. There are plenty of desolate areas.

Maybe it's the lack of community on the outside that makes it rough. Maybe getting preyed on by human raiders is as big a danger as the Infected. Like the original Dawn Of The Dead: You can deal with the zombies, but the biker caravan coming up the road will really fuck you up.

Graphical Fidelity

The graphics in The Last Of Us are not just beautiful, but also easy to parse. A lot of games of the PlayStation 3 generation get visually muddy. I'm sure the PlayStation exclusivity helps, allowing the full limits of the system to really be exploited. The game's medium pace may help, as well. Riding a horse is about as fast as you ever go. In a way, this game is kind of leisurely.

Bayou Billy

Speaking of muddy graphics, do you remember this fucking game? Hey, is that a car on the horizon, or a rock? Welp, it doesn't matter, 'cause I'm dead. Fuck you, Bayou Billy.

Cardio

Video game characters sure are cardio machines. Uncharted 2 starts with Nathan Drake being wounded, but he can still climb up a dangling train. His grip strength is godlike.

I like how Joel, while still a ridiculously relentless dude, feels a little bit fallible. As a human, he's still a miracle, but it does take him a moment to climb a wall, or choke a man to death. On a video game scale, he does feel like a bit of an older man.

The Flashlight

I was completely confused the first time I saw the "tip the controller" icon. Tip my controller? Okay, I tipped it -- What did it do?

I use the flashlight pretty sparingly, because I find the glow a bit severe. I'd prefer to just walk through the dark. I've also never seen a "shake to recharge" flashlight in real life,

so I had no idea what the heck was going on.

I read that the "failing flashlight" mechanic was a holdover from an earlier version of the game, where Joel could craft batteries. Maybe it would have related to the sugar bomb components, which have less overlap than the other items. I also read that if you happen to be playing without a motion controller, there's no way to recharge your flashlight. You have to reload your game, and your flashlight will be recharged.

The flashlight's not a big part of the game, but it seems like its battery level is a mechanic that probably should have been removed. If the flashlight had limitless charge, I don't think anyone would find it weird.

The First Spores

Tess and Joel come across a cloud of spores, and put on their gas masks. I heard someone mention that the spores should stick to clothes, which is a fair point. I guess it's lucky that they don't.

I like the spores as a method of infection. The bite-based infection of conventional zombies really wouldn't be enough to explain how the pandemic swept across the earth. But having corpses bloat up and send out a cloud of spores helps explain the spread. Joel comes across a guy trapped under rubble, who begs Joel to kill him. He's trapped in an abandoned building, infected, alone. It's hard to imagine a situation worse than that.

When you're in a bad situation, it's amazing how much your mind can tune out. When you're really sick, time passes as though you're in a semi-dream. Even if you're in pain, that pain will ebb eventually, and give you periodic reprieves.

But when something's really wrong, the pain never abates. That happened to me with appendicitis -- I thought I had food poisoning, but the pain was constant, and kept worsening. I learned that what I used to think of as peak pain was just the beginning of how bad things could hurt. When you're in a situation that's eventually gonna kill you, the pain gets worse than I ever understood it could.

If this guy's trapped under rubble, some part of him is probably crushed. I don't know what level of pain that causes, but I'm guessing it's somewhere on the "nightmare" scale. He's also constantly breathing in spores, which can't be pleasant. An infection is attacking his brain. And he's all alone. Tess and Joel's arrival was very unlikely -- They were planning to take the gate into Area 5. It's lucky that they're here, to help put him out of his misery.

They say depression is a chemical imbalance, that there's something depressed people are lacking. But what is that missing chemical actually doing? We're all gonna die someday, so maybe a proper chemical balance just shields us from the reality of how terrifying life is. It lets us not think about how we're eventually gonna die.

Having the lid torn off of the reality of life, just staring down at the bleak pointlessness off it all -- That must be how depressed people feel, and that's gotta be where this guy is at right now.

But I'll probably need these bullets for later, so I leave him. Sorry, dude!

Doubt

I'm heading to my first encounter with the Infected -- I'm gonna have to get real good at these, since I won't be picking up any health items. "Restart Encounter" will be my friend. I considered not using the restart option, and sallying forth in whatever shape I happened to be in. But that would soon whittle me down to a sliver of life, and the situation would become functionally identical, forcing me to restart as soon as I took any damage. Running on an empty life bar would also leave me without the option to brute force my way through a tough situation, if the need arises.

So, I'm gonna restart encounters with impunity, until things go just right. But even having decided that, I feel a bit nervous. What if I can't do this? I haven't felt this way since my first playthrough, and actually, not even then. I didn't have any doubt that I'd eventually complete the game. But without items, who knows? Maybe I'll grind this whole situation down into an unwinnable mess. The difficulty is back, with a vengeance!

Let me take this opportunity to discuss difficulty settings in modern games. This topic is fairly hot-button among gamers -- If you play on Normal, you're a wuss baby, and if you play on Hard, you're a fool masochist. I've heard all of the *very nuanced* arguments. But I've got some thoughts.

Too Easy

I've felt lately that playing games on harder difficulties adds tangible positives to the experience, and *The Last Of Us* brought that idea to a head. Playing *The Last Of Us* on Normal difficulty clearly changes the experience, to the point where I can tell what difficulty someone is playing on by the way they describe the game. It's frustrating to hear criticisms like "You can blast your way through this game", or "My immersion broke

because my inventory filled up". Those things only happen because the game's difficulty is set too low for a person with a lifetime of video game experience.

I do think Naughty Dog misbalanced Normal difficulty somewhat -- Scarcity is a very important part of *The Last Of Us*, and Normal difficulty is littered with items. But I understand why it happened. Modern difficulty modes are a concession to an unfathomably large and nebulous player base. Attempting to cater to such a demographic is functionally impossible. There's always gonna be someone for whom even the Easy mode is not close to easy enough.

So I can't really fault Naughty Dog for making things "too easy" -- That line is blurry at best, and probably not realistically measurable at all. It's really up to a player to know where they fall on the difficulty spectrum, and I believe that most players radically under-evaluate themselves.

Failure As A Gameplay Mechanic

Games have changed a lot since their inception. Originally, games didn't need a difficulty selection. Arcade games were solely about the challenge of that game's mechanics. Frequent and habitual failure was an accepted part of playing any game. You weren't supposed to succeed -- The point was only to see how long it would take before you lost.

Rather than focusing solely on a mechanical challenge, modern games are more commonly about a storyline. There's a presumption that since a player has paid for a game, they should be able to see that story through. The fundamental expectation has changed, to the point where frequent and habitual failure is not expected to be part of the gaming experience. Players want their progress to be constant, and anything that impedes that progress is seen as a failure of the game's design.

As a result of that changed expectation, Normal difficulty has functionally become Easy difficulty. I know that's something which combative online wags say, in an attempt to shame their fellow gamers. But I also think it's true.

A common sentiment is: "Normal difficulty is how the developers want me to play, so that's how I play." But I don't think that's what Normal difficulty is at all. Normal difficulty is intended for people with middling motor control; it's designed to be easy enough that players won't return a game to the store. Normal difficulty is not intended for those of us who've been playing video games our whole lives, who listen to gaming podcasts, or who read books about video games. Normal difficulty is intended for the masses.

The Only Teacher Is Pain

Playing *The Last Of Us* on Normal difficulty really fucks things up. The experience of desperate combat, and the sense of being in a broken, resource-starved world go right out the window. The balance of story and mechanics becomes something a player only receives a vague impression of, rather than something the player is aggressively experiencing.

As an example: I watched my friend Craig play through the Pittsburgh hotel on Normal difficulty. He was spotted by enemies, and ended up hiding at a choke point, shooting every single enemy and leaving them in a big corpse pile. "I feel like I did that wrong," he said.

Craig didn't intend for that immersion-breaking situation to occur; he was just trying to survive, and the absurd result was a function of playing on a lower difficulty setting. On a harder difficulty, he could not have survived that situation. He would have died, and would have had to re-strategize. But on Normal, virtually any approach can lead to a fudgy victory. Playing modern games on lower difficulties is often problematic in this way. A player ends up in a meta-game of what they "should" do, because the game itself is unequipped to punish anything but the most blatantly incorrect behavior.

Easier difficulties allow a player to progress through a game without fully learning and applying that game's systems. In *The Last Of Us*, when a fight is going poorly, a player won't learn that they should run, if they can overpower a building full of enemies. Instead, they'll stumble through the encounter, surviving against all reasonable odds, and won't feel compelled by the situation, or satisfied by what they've accomplished. Instead, they'll have a sense that something has gone wrong, without a clear guidepost as to what that error is.

I think that's why a lot of players left *The Last Of Us* thinking that the game mechanics felt sloppy -- As the game piles more weapons and items onto the player, it's entirely possible to play through the whole game without really learning how the combat mechanics work. Joel can push his way past any situation, no matter how outnumbered he is. The stealth system acts as a casual side-mechanic, rather than as an arbiter between life and death.

On harder difficulties, when a player loses control of a situation, they will likely die. That failure then forces a player to re-evaluate their strategy, and to experiment with new techniques. Progress will feel earned, rather than feeling rote or inevitable. The game will have a more clear metric for success, similar to those arcade games of yore. Older games may have been frustrating, but they did not feel arbitrary, and they did not feel loose. Older games, no matter how bizarre their surface conceit, always felt crystal

clear. Playing on a higher difficulty setting can make newer games feel that same way.

Dead Space

Another example that comes to mind is the original *Dead Space*. On Hard difficulty, the Necromorphs are not that much harder to kill than they are on Normal difficulty. A prepared player will have no serious trouble taking them out. The main difference is that on Hard, if the Necros get the drop on old Isaac, Isaac will not survive. He'll die horrifically, and will endeavor to learn how not to have that happen the next time.

Conversely, on lower difficulties, if a Necromorph gets the drop on Isaac, Isaac won't die. Instead, he'll find himself in the awkward situation of trying to shoot the enemy from close range. Or worse, he'll find himself using his awkward melee attacks. Both of these situations feel strange and unreal, and are very unsatisfying. In Alien movies, no one goes around punching the aliens.

Dead Space's game engine is not well suited to close-range situations. So when Isaac is ill-prepared, but makes it through a close-range battle, it doesn't feel like an exhilarating, near-death escape. Instead, the player moves on to the next encounter knowing that things did not go well, and that in a fair and just world, they should be super-duper dead. That feeling grows each time, until playing the game feels more like a disconnected chore than a vital experience. The enemies aren't *enemies*, they're increasingly abstract feeling speed-bumps.

Gaming Esteem

Muddling through low-stakes combat in *The Last Of Us* is a similar situation. Players aren't pushed to exercise their mind and reflexes, and instead are given a pass for something they feel like they didn't truly accomplish. After awhile, a player stops feeling like a true participant in the experience.

It might sound a little silly to say, but I think situations like that cause a gamer's self-esteem to suffer. Their gaming-esteem, if you will. Instead of experiencing a series of skin-of-their-teeth, heart pounding escapes, the game gives players a virtual shrug. It shuffles them off to the next encounter, where they stumble forward again and again, until the game is finally done.

I'll admit, I was initially afraid to play games on harder difficulties. My friend Matt encouraged me, insisting that I would have more fun that way. But I was worried. I didn't want to face the personal shame of not being able to do the things he could do.

How could I show my face after admitting that Hard was too hard? Best just to stick with Normal, and never have to learn of my own shortcomings.

But eventually I steeled my nerves, and bumped up that difficulty setting. Situations in games suddenly became pass/fail, rather than pass/pass, and I found that I started drawing from skills I'd accrued from a lifetime of game-playing. It was like moving out of my parents' house, or getting my first job -- I beat my first game on Hard, and my gamer-esteem grew three sizes that day.

I don't even remember what game it was, but I remember the feeling of crossing a threshold. Games came alive in a way that I hadn't felt since I was a kid. Now, I play every game on harder difficulties, and it's always amazing.

Of Course It's Not

Sometimes, playing on Hard difficulty is a total drag. Some games don't strongly support multiple strategies, so higher difficulties just leave you stuck, banging your head against a wall for way too long. In those cases, it's no big deal to drop the difficulty back down. Sometimes I go all the way down to Easy, and just content-tourist my way through a game that I don't really give a shit about.

But I don't start out that way, and in a well designed game, playing on Hard really does make a difference. I discover strategies I would never have tried otherwise, and I have crazy, heart-in-my-throat moments that can only come from being pushed out of the nest.

Be Cool Or Be Roadkill

Developers really aren't thinking of us when they balance games for Normal or Easy difficulty. If you're a professional game reviewer and you play games on Normal, then you've gotta quit doing that. Those modes are for people who are missing fingers, or who are high all the time, or who still need babysitters for when their parents go out to get high all the time.

It's our responsibility not to damage games for ourselves by defaulting to those lower difficulties. Normal difficulty is Normal Person Mode, and you are not a normal person. You've spent your entire life obsessed with video games, and I know that's true, because you're reading this book. Hard mode is the mode for you.

You can do it! I believe in you! And if Hard mode sucks, just drop the difficulty back

down. No biggie. But that small act of going into the menu, and selecting Hard -- That feels pretty goddamn good. Guaranteed, or your money back.

The First Infected

Alright, back to the game! We're fighting our first group of Infected! On Survivor difficulty! With no pickups! Yeah! Hardcore!

I know the Infected can't see light, but it still feels weird to me to leave the flashlight on. There's a note on the loading screen insisting that light is safe, but I can never take that fully on board. It feels more comfortable to fight them in the dark.

The fight goes super poorly, and I get spotted immediately. But Tess shoots the shit out of everyone, so I don't take any damage. Good enough!

Melee In The Last Of Us

I love using melee attacks in games. In the Uncharted series, my endgame stats are always about 50% melee. Even in a game like Killzone 3, not known primarily as a close-quarters game, my end-stats were about 50% melee. Shooting seems so impersonal -- I wanna get right in there and punch a guy in the mush.

My Last Of Us melee stats are no different, so I ended up doing a lot of melee experimentation. It's a surprisingly robust system, considering it consists mainly of mashing one button. The encounters are mainly timing-based -- Whoever gets the first hit is (generally) the winner of that skirmish. It sounds simple, but getting the first blow on a charging Infected can be a real kick in the dick.

Multiple enemies, different weapons and the varied environments all cause a simple mechanic to become varied. A high level of situational awareness is required for successful melee combat in The Last Of Us.

I'm not looking forward to Ish's stronghold, I can tell you that. The section where Joel and Sam team up -- That place is teeming with Infected, who are all super-psycho. There's no way I'm getting through that shit without some damage.

The Outskirts

After a successful round of monster murders, Joel and Tess leave the spore-zone. We

find a note left to some guy's brother, explaining that his group was trying to get into the Boston QZ, but got infected. So those are the guys we just fought. RIP, losers.

Somehow, I missed that note on all three of my playthroughs. I later noticed that on the chapter menu, the game lists how many lore items remain in each area. That was when I went searching, and this note is not even remotely hidden. It's just lying there. It's weird when little parts of a game completely elude you.

After Joel reads the note, he and Tess talk about it. It really tickles me when that happens, because the lack of similar interactions was something that distinctly annoyed me in Bioshock: Infinite.

AI Companions

I like drawing comparisons between The Last Of Us and Bioshock: Infinite, because they're such close contemporaries, and attempt so many similar things.

Bioshock: Infinite's plot was not for me, mainly because it was so shitty. But small moments would be interesting, like the Voxophone where a bounty hunter killed some would-be assassins, in the very room where Booker and Elizabeth stood. That was spooky as shit, listening to the Voxophone at the very scene of the crime. I turned to Elizabeth, but she had nothing to say. She was just trotting around in that dumb little animation that she does. I was already struggling greatly to feel invested in either her or Booker, and that moment felt like a real let down.

While I'm complaining, did you notice that Bioshock: Infinite has fall damage? Booker can fling himself from a Skyline and fly sixty feet through the air, landing completely unscathed. But if he falls a fraction of that height, he takes a big chunk of damage. It's like nobody gave a shit at all about that game, which is bizarre, because I know that they did care. But at points like that, it seemed like they were being borderline aggressive about trying to keep a sense of cohesion from getting anywhere near that game.

But hey, shit's not perfect in The Last Of Us either. The AI characters get in your way a lot, especially in the early Boston sections. They'll quickly hop aside when they're blocking you, and I guess that's about the best they can do. A little hand-on-the-shoulder, "I gotta get by" animation would be cool, but that'd probably cause more technical hiccups than its worth.

I wonder how weird it would feel if you just passed through your companions? Probably pretty weird. But there's no gameplay benefit to bumping into each other. It's a question of what breaks immersion less: Phantom companions, or hopping companions? That'd

be a baffling choice for the options screen. Hopping Companions? Yes/No.

Enemies mainly ignore the companions in both Infinite and The Last Of Us, and that's clearly for the best. Companions need to be around for plot reasons, and if they can help the player occasionally, that's great. But a fully-vulnerable, plot-centric companion is a problem that video games are still nowhere near cracking.

Shanty Town

Joel and Tess keep traveling. I was always a little fuzzy about what this run is about -- We go outside the wall, then back into the city. Turns out it's real simple: Area 5's gate was closed due to the explosion, so Joel and Tess had to sneak around, giving the checkpoint a wide berth. Somehow, while in the flow of the game, the trip seems kinda arbitrary and convoluted. I'm just going where Tess tells me.

The overgrown areas outside the wall look beautiful; nature reclaiming civilization is definitely a big part of this game. No time to dwell though, 'cause we're heading into a shitty shanty town! Let's check it out!

If you watch the guy who's cooking the rat, he'll eventually give it a little flip. That's also beautiful. In its own way.

There are two guys fighting in a little Pit Fighter ring, but surprisingly few people are watching them. Must be the low season. The guys across the way are just sitting playing cards, rather than watching the bloodsport. If Junior High School taught me anything, it's that a fight draws a crowd. That's about all it taught me, actually. Did Junior High lie? Man, maybe it didn't teach me shit.

This place really is filthy. That's a common critique in Fallout 3, as well -- I know it's the post-apocalypse, and everyone's living on the ragged edge. But it's been decades. Can't you clean up a little fucking bit? Maybe you'd act a little less savage if you weren't constantly grappling with tetanus. Paint some nice flower patterns on stuff, Kaylee-style. Being on an apocalypse budget doesn't mean you have to live an apocalypse lifestyle. Do a little spring sprucing! You'll look better, you'll feel better, and maybe people will be slightly less inclined to eat your face.

Some guy stops Joel, then apologizes when he sees Tess. Joel asks, "Who's that?", and Tess says, "Just some old headache."

It's not clear how long Tess and Joel have been together, and maybe it hasn't been too long. That guy might have been the previous Joel. Tess definitely keeps her men

whipped, current and ex alike. Wh-ksh! That's a whip sound.

Tess

My initial impression of Tess was that she seemed peculiarly hot, for an apocalypse-survival scenario. Naughty Dog is no stranger to good looking ladies -- And that's an example of a sentence that would never actually come out of a person's mouth. But Tess seemed drawn from that Uncharted, pretty-lady tradition, and I thought of her more as a placeholder for who the real person would be.

I do that a lot when watching movies -- To me, these beautiful people are just stand ins for the actual character. For example, Sam from Garden State is a quirky, boyfriendless paralegal who falls into Zach Braff's life. That feels a lot more believable if Sam is a plain-jane, possibly overweight girl, than it does if she's Natalie Portman. I walked past Natalie Portman once in New York, and man... Just, like, shit dude. I mean, fuck. You know what I'm saying? Bladow! Blaaa... dowww.

I'm sure people are already offended by this opinion. That I'm *classist* against beautiful people. And probably, I am. What did I listen to all those Marilyn Manson songs for, if not for this? And as if anyone reading this is good looking. You and I are in this together, ugly. So, relax.

My friend Matt asked what I expected of Tess: A woman with a buzzcut and a hook hand? And I said, yeah, kinda. Someone more outwardly *tough*. But then I came up with an alternate theory: Maybe being attractive doesn't hinder Tess. Maybe she knows how to marshal the additional attention her looks would bring.

My alternate theory is that Tess uses her attractiveness as leverage, to help her survive. When Tess walks through the underbelly of the city, saying things like, "Not now," I get the sense that maybe she trades more than just weapons and cargo. Maybe part of her power is that her sexuality is one of her bargaining chips, a way to make herself more indispensable among this community. If you could sell guns to Tess, or sell guns to Robert, but Tess offers to spend some time with you -- That's a commodity that Robert can't match.

American Sex Ed

If you immediately balk at the idea that Tess might bargain with her sexuality, or that doing so would be degrading to her, I'm gonna go ahead and peg you as an American. What's that? You are? Why, my stars! How did I ever guess, you unique snowflake,

you?

Look, America -- I don't mean to be creepy, but we Canadians have been watching you. That's kind of our only job -- We're America's mall cop. We can't do much with what we learn, but we can observe and report. And we've noticed, in our observing, that you guys are really, really repressed. Really.

Canada is a lot like America, but there are notable differences between our countries. My favorite example is Radiohead's "Paranoid Android" video. It's a cartoon that involves, at one point, a man cutting off his own limbs with a chainsaw. It's mostly silly, but that scene is a little gruesome. It was edited in Canada, so you could only see a bit of the limb removal on the edges of the screen. The censorship seemed fairly pointless and unnecessary, but that's Canada for you.

In America, they didn't take notice of the limb-sawing. Instead, they cared about the mermaids! Topless cartoon mermaids! Breasts on tv! For shame! Those are circles with other, smaller circles drawn inside of them! What if a kid sees that? So in America, those nipples were covered up. In the violence vs sexuality debate, there's no example more clear than that video.

In Canada, there was an afternoon game show called "40 degrés à l'ombre", piped in straight from France. It took place on a topless beach, so there were boobs everywhere. That was on when I got home from school, and it was certainly not some kind of national issue. It was just a show with boobs, and nobody gave a shit.

Now, I don't wanna be judgy with all my judging. America was founded as a puritanical society, and I know it's tough to turn around attitudes that are that ingrained. I just want to point out that outside of America, even right next door to America, things are different. Different to the point of being opposite.

I lived in the U.S. for a couple of years, and that was my main take-away: Americans have a hard time believing that the rest of the world has dissimilar values to them, or that their own values are really weird and stupid. But that's America for you.

Isolationism

America has spent a long time as a basically isolated country. It's constantly absorbing its own culture, and has become the country-sized equivalent of a shut-in. It's a nice guy overall, but is just kinda... off. A little weird. America doesn't fit in too well at the family picnic. It's really hung up about breasts, and is constantly watching shows about violent crime scenes and talking about guns.

Once in awhile, America gets all riled up about its idea of morality, and you've just gotta politely excuse yourself until it calms down. Sex is nothing more than rubbing some body parts together, but to America, it's the *dirtiest* thing you could ever do. Definitely an intense individual.

Maybe America will level out when it's older. My cousin was like that, and now he's got two kids and everything's going fine. So, you never know. You gotta be patient. Let 'em find their own way.

The Art Of Sleevelessness

One thing is certain about Tess -- Her choice of clothing is ridiculous. I feel that way about every zombie story: If you're traveling outside the walls of a quarantined zone, with the potential of running into packs of crazed, violent monsters who can kill you with a single bite... *Wear some sleeves.* Get a leather jacket, a turtleneck, *something.* Bare arms are zombie farms. Didn't your mom ever tell you that? I thought everyone knew that.

Hired Goons

A group of Robert's goons saunters up, all tough-guy-like. One of them threatens Tess, and she shoots said goon in his face. That dude had a mother, maybe some siblings. Now, he's dead. Yeah!

Tess's actions are supposed to read as, Tess is tough. Tess is no nonsense, and she's not afraid to use violence. But Tess as a character really did take a couple of playthroughs to grow on me, because how it read to me is, "Tess is crazy."

Shooting someone in the face is literally the worst way to finesse any situation. If you push this hard against society, particularly a post-apocalyptic society, it's gonna push back, and you're not gonna make it. Society will push until you die.

Joel says, "You know [Robert]'s expecting us", and Tess says, "Well, that'll make it more interesting." So there's literally no plan. We're just gonna brute force our way toward a guy, who has a bunch of people waiting to kill us when we get there. These Boston parts of the game really do feel a bit off the mark.

I get that this game is about a very harsh and brutal society. It's about doing whatever you can to get the advantage over other people, who are just as desperate to get the advantage over you. But walking deliberately into a violent situation, where you're

outnumbered by people who are expecting you, and who aren't particularly afraid of you, is not a realistic way to achieve that goal. That's battling against all odds of reality. Forgive the denigrating term, but that's some video game shit. That's Rambo shit. Not First Blood shit, but Eighties lunch box rocket-launcher shit.

Devil's Advocate: Maybe Tess has learned that planning doesn't matter. Maybe the world is so violent, and so random, that playing the angles isn't even worth it. Luck might be the only thing worth relying on. So go in guns blazing, and keep your apocalypse-gnarled fingers crossed. That's pretty shaky sounding, but if I had to find a way to justify her actions, I'd go with that.

Two Angry Men

After Tess shoots the guy, his two friends get pretty mad, so we've gotta fight them. I try to move toward a guy who's aiming a gun directly at me, which will always get you shot. I know that, and I did it anyway, so I have to restart the encounter.

It takes a few tries to make it through unscathed, and this is only two enemies. I'm starting to think that this ultra-hard custom playthrough might not be real easy.

Shipping Yard Fight

Next up are a half dozen guys spread throughout a two story warehouse. I spy an enemy who's walking up some stairs as though they were a flat ramp. Maybe enemies always do that, not walking up each individual step, but I've only noticed it here. It's a weird little taste of how video games change. Until recently, I wouldn't even have expected a character to properly interact with stairs.

This is my first chance to really break out the stealth mechanics. Time to sneak up on some motherfuckers.

One On One Combat

The stealth combat in The Last Of Us feels weirdly plausible, despite the fact that I'll choke out about three hundred people on a given playthrough. This game is about isolating enemies, and taking them out one at a time. There's not necessarily that much in the way of combat mechanics, it's mostly about isolation and timing. Can anyone see me right now? Do I have time to choke this guy out before someone does?

But even if he gets caught, Joel is a grizzled veteran. In a one on one fight, he's gonna win. That makes sense to me: A technically superior fighter is always gonna beat a sloppy one. So if Joel can get the drop on his opponents, maybe he could kill that many people. It's not likely, and the numbers are obviously inflated for gameplay reasons. But the combat is so careful, and so methodical, that Joel's victories feel surprisingly plausible to me.

Joel's choking arm sure must get tired, though. It would be cool if there was a stamina meter, and when it was low enemies would start to break free of Joel's grip. The stamina meter was a cool thing in *I Am Alive*, I'd love to see that system implemented in a game that I didn't hate.

Serial Killing

In regards to Joel's huge body count -- I was reading a Wikipedia list of serial killers, listed by number of victims. It's pretty fucking bananas, to describe something horrifying with inappropriate levity.

There are people who have killed one or more people a week, for *years*. We're very lucky that the vast majority of people are disinterested in serial killing, because when somebody decides to go for it, it really confirms that society is an illusion. We're all playing along, pretending that we live in a safe and controlled environment. But if you decide not to follow the rules, reprisal can be a ludicrously long time coming. Like I said, you can kill a person every week, and society is a net so loose that it just never catches you.

On that highly creepy note, let's get back to discussing this murder simulator.

Carrying Corpses

I'm okay with how you can't move bodies in *The Last Of Us*. It would only offer a minor tactical advantage, and it would probably add an extra hour of playtime that was comprised of nothing but mechanical tedium. I think it's to a game's credit when it knows where to draw the line, regarding what systems are and are not important. My stamina meter idea, for example, is probably really dumb.

Footfalls

I've heard people say that with big sub-woofers, the clomp of your companion's feet is

overly loud. I can see how that would be very annoying and distracting. It probably would have been best to keep the companion footfalls silent. In general, people don't seem to notice when a game is lacking a sound. But they do notice when a game is hammering out sounds inappropriately.

Bethesda games are brutal for that -- The repetition of dialogue or ambient sound is incredibly noticeable and distracting. One of the first mods you're always gonna see is "Make Dogs Bark At 50% Volume", or something along those lines. But if those sounds were omitted, I doubt that anybody would find that weird.

I was just thinking about how many sounds I ignore in my day-to-day. I'm at a coffee shop, and I'm ignoring the staff talking. I'm ignoring the traffic outside. I'm ignoring the music, I'm ignoring the little snapping sound that the keyboard on my phone makes as I write this.

But in a video game, players are hyper-aware. They have to listen carefully for any audio cue that signifies danger. So bathing the environment in all the sounds of the real world is too much -- It becomes exhausting to listen to. Granted, I'm quite sensitive to sound; I always sleep with earplugs in, and I put in my headphones during movie trailers, to dampen their obnoxious bombast. So I'm an extreme case. But with sound design, it does seem better to err on the side of caution.

Still Battling The Shipyard Goons

It still feels weird every time I leave an item behind. The first time through a game is about doing whatever you can to exploit the game's systems, in order to ensure survival. The second time through might be a bit more about experimentation, since you no longer fear facing abject, total failure. But to just leave everything feels bizarre. Leaving the bricks and bottles still hurts the most. They've always been a huge part of my combat strategy. Christ, I miss them.

It's a shame that the combat in this game didn't sink in for everyone. On my first play-through, I admit that it didn't quite come together for me, either. But the more I understand it, the more I find it remarkable. The way these enemies move around, the way the situation is slightly different every time, the way that after 1600 murders the game can still surprise me -- That's pretty amazing.

The developers mentioned in the *Grounded* documentary that the combat system came together late in the process. They said that for a long time, it wasn't very fun. Making enemies act smart usually meant making them be ruthlessly, absurdly efficient. Due to the complexity of designing a game, they just had to press onward and hope things

would fall into place in time. Obviously each person's mileage varies, but the game really fell into a sweet spot for me.

I must be falling into a fisticuffs groove, because I get all of these guys on the first try. No more running at someone who's pointing a pistol at me. Tess is uncannily aware of the exact moment when we've cleared the area. She leaves cover and announces us safe. Maybe she's an X-Man. Handy power, though.

Chasing Robert

Now we spy Robert slinking away, and have to take out another half dozen of his hired goons. I'm having a hard time not being seen, but the enemy AI is pretty easy to scramble. Once you run away, they stay alerted, but move around so slowly that it's functionally similar to them being unaware.

It's interesting to see how game design decisions work together: Once enemies have lost sight of Joel, they do become notably passive. Being spotted is not at all like a Metal Gear Solid death-combat gangbang -- Human enemies in The Last Of Us are relatively easy to reset. Hence, the mechanic of moving enemy corpses can be omitted. Not a huge observation, but it's just neat. Video games are neat.

I have to be careful not to pick up items while I'm trying to grab someone. I had to restart the encounter because I accidentally picked up a 2x4. No, Joel! This is the Super Apocalypse! I'm not gonna have you carrying around a 2x4 for the entire game. That wood rotted away long ago!

I clear the area in a few tries, and discover my first shiv. I look at it longingly, but don't pick it up. Stay strong, son. Super Apocalypse.

A Funny Little Muddle Called Robert

In trying to add a sense of reality to this quest, Robert is not much help. He's apparently a major player in this town, a serious gun runner. He can mark you for death, hiring tons of people who will put their lives on the line to protect him.

But upon meeting Robert, he fires his gun wildly, yells a few things, and then *throws the gun at us*. I'm amazed he didn't slip on a nearby cream pie and go careening head first into a manure wagon. Robert's a fucking jerkoff.

It's tough to divine much of anything about Robert, making him unique among Last Of

Us characters. Everyone else has some little window into their personality, something that lets you at least speculate about the larger context of their lives. But Robert's just some shitty guy.

One note written by a hired goon mentions that a shipment got hijacked, and Robert talked out a truce with the hijackers. But the goon suspected Robert may have arranged the whole thing. So Robert either has a knack for diplomacy, or a knack for large-scale fraud, and either skill could be impressive. I might even be able to develop some respect for Robert, if he didn't throw a gun at me.

There must be a greater reason for that gun throw. It's so out of character for this game. Maybe it's to make it expressly clear that you can chase after Robert without seeking cover. Robert won't take pot-shots at you, because he's out of bullets. It's a little inelegant, but yeah, that sounds pretty plausible.

Woo! Naughty Dog's still the best! Hooray, Naughty Dog! I'm gonna dissect the shit out of this game, but don't worry! I got your back, buddy!

Catching Ol' Gun-Throwing Robbie

We corner Robert, and Tess asks him where their gun shipment is. Robert pulls the old "No hard feelings, right?" -- Robert really is like a stand-in for an average video game character. In other games, that would be a fully acceptable line of dialogue. Here, it feels like a lead weight, and is certainly something that a man in his situation would not say. I'm really getting tired of trying to justify Robert. Thank god this dude's about to die.

Even while pinned down by local psychopaths Tess and Joel, Robert still doesn't wanna narc on the Fireflies. Those Fireflies, man... there's definitely something creepy going on there.

And he's dead. Fucking Robert. Joel literally does not bat an eye at Tess shooting Robert through the head. Sure, Robert tried to kill them, and the plan was to kill him right back. But you'd think Joel would at least flinch for a second. Human life really does not mean shit to our good friend Joel.

Joel Bad

The hand-wringing people did about the ending of The Last Of Us really did seem misplaced. "They made me do things I didn't want to do! They put blood on my hands! Oh, lordy! I didn't want to kill those doctors! I wanted to do good! I wanted a choice!"

I think some players are frankly delusional about the kinds of characters they've been controlling in games for all these years. Joel, as a video game archetype, is not unusual. In fact, he's *the archetype* -- A handsome, muscular, brown haired white guy, who is also a wanton murderer. The difference is that Joel doesn't suddenly get treated like some kind of hero at the end.

But let's discuss that more at the end. Or, at random times throughout, whenever the fancy overtakes me. Cool.

Marlene's Introduction

Robert gives way to Marlene, the wanted-sign-featured leader of the mythical Fireflies.

I initially found Marlene to be another fairly generic character; there are a lot of those kicking around Boston. Later characters fill smaller and more intimate roles, where Marlene is basically *The Last Of Us*'s equivalent of a celebrity. That may be the trouble, that Marlene can't be separated from the Fireflies, a group which already carries a somewhat unrealistic weight in the world. But as the figurehead of that fairly fanciful unit, the character of Marlene could definitely be worse. By the end of the story, she comes into her own.

Regarding the deadness of Robert, Marlene says, "I needed him alive." Later, Tess will mention that she and Joel weren't her first, or even second choice to escort Ellie. That makes me wonder: Was Marlene gonna arrange an escort through Robert?

The Military is trying to flush out the Fireflies, and Ellie needs to escape the city immediately -- Marlene is in a tight spot. But using Robert seems like poor problem solving. He threw a fucking *gun*, for christ's sake. He's an idiot. Surely using Robert is a much worse choice than giving Ellie to a psychopath with a daughter complex, who will later murder the Fireflies' entire lab team, and potentially doom all of humankind... Okay. So, maybe Robert wouldn't be so bad.

Speaking of psychopaths, Joel sure does scratch the back of his head a lot. It's like he's in some damn anime. Maybe he has lice.

Joel runs around with Tess and Marlene a bit, then fights some soldiers. It's pretty creepy to grab an enemy and not choke them out right away. They quietly ask not to be killed. It's quite a courtesy that they never call out to their friends. I guess a gun to the head might do that.

I wonder: How predictable are people? If you hold a gun to the head of a hundred indi-

vidual people, and tell them not to call out, maybe none of them will. These serial killers should be keeping better notes. I wanna know these things. Don't just go into a frothy, red-tinged murderer rage -- Bring a Newton or something. Get some stats.

Companion AI

I've read a lot of comments about the bizarre behavior of companions in The Last Of Us. Honestly, that's not something I noticed much during my playthroughs. But it does happen here, with both Tess and Marlene bumping awkwardly into a soldier, who remains oblivious. To be fair, it happens because I'm trying to perform an outlandish sequence break, bringing my companions much deeper into enemy space than they would normally be. Also, it does not work.

I wonder if glitchy AI could be another consequence of playing the game on lower difficulties? Easier gameplay allows for a less measured approach to be taken by the player, which then leads to more overlap between companion and enemy pathing. And subsequently, more visibly erratic behavior by companions.

I barely know what I'm talking about here, but that seems like it could be a thing. Maybe it's not entirely coincidental that I rarely noticed unusual behavior from my companions. Because I'm a hard man, who plays on hard difficulties. I'm not running around all crazy, throttling the systems of some poor game that hasn't been given the tools to resist my haphazard behavior.

Ellie's Introduction

I take out these four guys, and we've done it: We got all the way to Ellie with no damage taken. To an outside observer, this must have looked like the luckiest day of old Joel's battlin' life. A shit ton of people dead without taking a scratch.

We meet Ellie, the stabby, suspicious teen. Marlene arrived on the scene injured, did I mention that? So since Marlene is in no shape to go adventuring, she says Tess and Joel can get their guns if they deliver Ellie to a drop point. The quest to save the world is motivated by guns. Ironic! Little did they know that Joel himself is the most deadly weapon of all. Double ironic! Or something, I don't know. You went to school, you tell me.

When I first saw Ashley Johnson, the actress who plays Ellie, I recognized her from her appearances in Joss Whedon stuff. He clearly likes her, and if Joss Whedon likes you, then you're okay by me. I'd probably lend you money, just based on your association with Joss Whedon. But you never ask. Because you're a class act all around.

Ellie doesn't wanna go with this grizzled old weirdo, but Marlene says it's okay. Marlene used to know Joel's brother Tommy, and Tommy vouched for him. Then she says, "No more talking." Maybe Joel's terseness isn't that much of a change to Ellie's routine -- I bet she gets tired of hanging out with these tough-ass pricks all the time.

So Joel and Ellie head to a safehouse, while Tess goes to check on the guns. Judging by one of Tess' earlier smuggling manifests, guns aren't usually on the docket. They normally smuggle regular items, like clothes and toilet paper. That could be an extra reason why Tess is so excited by these guns -- This could be their move up into the big time, filling the gap vacated by the recently-bulletted Robert.

Maybe that's why Robert threw his gun: Because he's gun-rich. He doesn't even need to fire them, just throw gun after gun, battering his foes to death under a crushing pile of guns. And soon, Tess and Joel will be the gun-throwers.

Ellie sees bodies on the ground, and asks Joel what happened to them. Joel says, "The Fireflies." He doesn't blame the soldiers, or the Military. He places the blame for any deaths squarely on the Fireflies.

It's obvious, the more I play, that Joel has absolutely no positive opinion of the Fireflies. It could be that he harbors some bitterness about Tommy leaving to join their ranks. But on a larger level, I think he's offended by their idealism. Everyone in this world is fucking with somebody else, but at least it's for practical, self-interested reasons. The Fireflies are fucking with everybody over *ideals*. They're leading people into violent

action in the name of some abstract, ill-defined hope. At the very least, Joel's gotta find that pretty fucking annoying.

Ellie Tech

When Ellie's standing around, she occasionally wipes her knife on her pantleg. The knife, however, remains bloody. It's probably easier for it to always stay a bit bloody, rather than swap in a different knife model. Or, the knife is so eternally caked in the blood of military school bitches that it will never be clean again.

Punching Ellie has no effect. Can you imagine if it did? Imagine if at any point, the story needed to be able to explain away a violent, unmotivated pummeling? The number of problems that would cause boggles the mind.

When we get to some stairs, Joel and Ellie both walk up each step properly. It's a small thing, but it's so much better than older games, where characters would float up stairs without their walk animation even changing. Uncharted was the first series where the fluidity of the character's motions was really obvious to me -- The way Drake could leap from a wall, stumble a bit as he landed, and reload a gun, all at the same time, was pretty amazing.

Joel And Tess's Safehouse

Joel and Ellie arrive at the safehouse, and Joel takes a little nap to kill time while waiting on Tess.

I love this scene of Joel and Ellie at the hideout together. This might be the first time Joel's been left to look after a teenage girl since the death of his daughter, and he tries to play it cool. But inside, I bet his subconscious is already freaking out, trying to strengthen his mental walls in the hopes of keeping this whole situation from attacking his mind. On subsequent playthroughs, there's a weird feeling of doom in the air. I don't think Naughty Dog did anything in particular to cue that feeling, but in the larger context of the story, this quiet time between our two protagonists seems significant. Even if Joel sleeps through it.

I initially found it weird that Joel lays down with his backpack on. It seemed like something a 1997-era PlayStation character would do, who had no ability to remove a backpack from his character model. But Naughty Dog is obviously not hampered by those kinds of limitations. I decided that Joel must sleep on his pack so Ellie won't fuck with his stuff. Given that there's a gun in there, it's probably a good choice. This scrappy kid,

who wipes a bloody knife on her pantleg, definitely seems like a good candidate for stealing some shit.

Speaking of backpacks, it's pretty impressive that Naughty Dog made Joel wearing a backpack seem cool. That's not an easy thing to do.

The first reference is made to Joel's watch, with Ellie saying, "Your watch is broken". I like how rarely overt symbolism is used in this game. The watch is the big one, and I didn't really notice it the first time through.

Of course, the entire apocalypse could be seen as symbolic of Joel's barren internal landscape. As he is a broken man, so is the very earth broken! The pain in his heart mirrors the pain in the player, as a Clicker bites them *for the fiftieth fucking time!* It's no wonder in-depth analysis of video games gets so wanky; it's a really easy thing to slip into.

By pressing buttons on the controller, we are literally *pressing Joel's buttons*. With the crafting system, we're trying to "craft" into being the lost desires of a haggard soul. By shooting a fucking zombie in its gross zombie face, we're splattering the hopes and dreams of the human race across the pavement of an uncaring cosmos. Right?

I'm not saying I won't do some of that during the course of this book. I'm just saying that it's not real difficult to do.

Self-Tailoring A Story

When trying to tell a compelling video game story, I think a lack of player options can be beneficial. The Last Of Us is on a single, set path, and I think the overall story benefits greatly from that decision.

But in more malleable games, it can be fun to alter a story's course, in order to eliminate parts that you don't like. In some games, you can outright murder the characters that annoy you.

In Fallout 3, I was so excited to finally meet Three Dog. I could barely wait to explain to him that an over-the-top, cheesy DJ was insulting to the very notion of the apocalypse.

But I could tell by the vacant look in his eye that my words were not getting through. I knew that as soon as I left his station, he was gonna go right back to his ear-mangling, hackle-raising nonsense. So I pulled out a gun, and I blew up that fool's head! Brap! Brap!

As a sign of respect, I did wear Three Dog's headband throughout the rest of my adventures. I smiled every time an awkward intern came on the air to announce that they were having clerical problems, because someone had exploded Three Dog's dumb head. I had brought some peace to the wasteland. I had made a difference.

Another example is in the first chapter of Telltale's The Walking Dead: You can choose to rescue a woman named Carley, or a guy named Doug. Players overwhelmingly chose Carley, but not me. I chose Doug, without a moment's hesitation, because Carley committed the sin of offending my storytelling sensibilities.

Firstly, Carley dropped some pretty heavy hints that she found Doug cute, and that dialogue was about as organic as a Pop Tart made of plastic. So Carley was already on my watch list. Later, while trying to hold back a zombie horde, in a moment of extreme crisis, Carley sealed her fate.

She said, "Doug, if we don't make it through this, you should know..."

Really, lady? You're gonna say this now, while mind-scrambling amounts of adrenaline are pumping through you? You're gonna confess your feelings during the most terrifying moments of your entire life? What is this, a soap opera? A soap opera from Mexican Netflix, where the description says: "1 Season, 290 Episodes"? Is that what this is, Carley?

Not on my watch, it's not. I chose Doug, and I never looked back. Editing through murder: One of the great joys of video games.

Tess Loves Guns

Still in the safe house, we jump forward in time, to later that night. Ellie is staring out the window, into the rain. She mentions how she's never been this close to being outside the city. I love that moment -- I love rain in movies, in video games, in real life... Unless it's in the form of a tsunami, rain is just goddamn pleasant. And even as a tsunami, that'd be a hell of a way to go. Bring it on, God! I'm asking for it! I'm requesting a custom death! I dare you! I'M CALLING YOU OUT!

...Skies are still clear. I guess I'll just keep writing this book, then.

Joel asks Ellie, "What on earth do the Fireflies want with you?" Maybe this is the first crack in his fatherly facade -- Joel knows that association with the Fireflies means idealism and death. Whatever their plans are for Ellie, there's no way that any of it is actually for her own good.

Tess rocks through the door before Ellie can answer, and says she saw the guns. She says there are a lot of them, and I like the way she squares her jaw. Merchandise is what's important to Tess. She's excited as shit to get her hands on those guns, and to move up the Boston food chain.

I don't think Joel is quite that invested in the smuggler's life. It seems more like smuggling is just a way to keep him busy, and to help keep his mind off the crushing awfulness of the post-apocalypse world.

Tess is younger than Joel -- Maybe she was in her early teens when the apocalypse happened. That might make it easier for her to adapt than it is for Joel. For her, maybe the change was interpreted less as a loss, and more like the most cataclysmic version of puberty imaginable.

It wouldn't have been a treat, but maybe that timing helped her to internalize and accept the changes in the world. Whereas Joel was already a grown man when things fell apart. Even without the trauma of losing his daughter, maybe that adult awareness of everything that had been lost became totally irreconcilable in his mind.

I don't know, it's just a theory. I told you I was gonna put some wanky bullshit in here from time to time.

Into The Rain

Marlene told Tess that a Firefly contingent had traveled all the way from another city to pick up Ellie. That clears up a bit of the nebulousness surrounding the Fireflies: When people refer to Marlene as the leader, they're only talking about Boston, which is not where central command is located.

It's now Tess and Joel's job to deliver Ellie to these out-of-towners, so let's roll!

Exiting the hideout, you can find an invoice that Tess compiled, of Bill's latest supply delivery. The invoice includes some side-notes about the merchandise that she left for Joel, and it's a lot more playful than I expected. I guess when Tess has a new shipment of stuff, it puts her in a good mood. Those guns are gonna make her ecstatic! Except that she's gonna die before she sees them. Well, darn it.

We're leaving the Boston QZ, and this is the first section of the game where I noticed that if you shine your flashlight in another character's eyes, they'll squint and put up a hand to block the light. I love little details like that.

Another detail is that the rain falls in sheets across the broken pavement, and Tess & Ellie both shield themselves from it. Man, I fucking love this game. The details are so insanely good. Most game characters seem like scarecrows, just rough approximations of human beings. Characters in The Last Of Us are more like wax sculptures: At first glance, they really do seem a lot like the real thing.

Technological Realism

The first time I noticed water affecting a character's pants was in the first Uncharted. Drake's pants would get wet up to the point where they'd been submerged, and then would slowly dry out. I didn't love using the Sixaxis to throw grenades, but I loved those pants. Games with a simplified aesthetic are also beautiful, but there's something uniquely gripping about games that push the boundaries of graphical technology.

Part of what makes cutting-edge games so exciting is how they can make larger technological progress seem immediately tangible. The first time I played King's Quest VI, or Mario 64 -- Those moments stuck with me.

My parents' generation seems to see video games as toys, just something to play with. The R.O.B. The Robot approach. But for my generation, video games have a greater significance.

It's hard to comprehend the state of cancer research, or global famine, or a million other world-spanning issues. But the increasing complexity of video games can act as a sort of report. This may sound weird to say, but I've always thought of video game technology as a signifier of what the human race at large is accomplishing. Every new boundary broken in a video game means that same boundary has also been broken in other fields -- Video games move these enormous concepts out of the abstract, and into a format that we can parse and understand in a very personal, visceral way.

I may be overstating this concept, but I think this may be one reason why people in my age group have taken such comfort from video games throughout our lives. As long as video games are improving, then technology is advancing. We may have only been looking at Super NES screenshots in a magazine, but in the back of our minds, it meant something deeper to us. We could see that humankind was moving forward.

My first video game system was a Pong-clone from Radio Shack, and now I can play games with people all over the world on a little device in my pocket. The advancements within my lifetime have been astounding. If our technology can advance at that rate, then we could overcome our problems. As crazy as the world is, things could ultimately be all right. Whenever we saw the latest screenshot of the newest game, deep down, I

think that sense of security is what we were really feeling.

On the other hand, this could be a sign of my terminal shallowness. I can read articles and see headlines about technological progress, and it doesn't fully sink in. But when I see that wetness on Nathan Drake's pantlegs, suddenly, in a flash, I feel like I understand. I have an awareness of the state of our progress.

Moral Relativism

I love how each group in The Last Of Us has a valid point of view. There isn't a lot of time spent examining the Military in Boston, but in the American Dreams prequel comic, Ellie talks to the army guy who runs her Military school:

"Do you know what stands between the hordes of infected and all the stragglers living in this city?" the Military Guy asks.

Ellie says, "A giant concrete wall?"

"*Me!*" says Military Guy. "And every other soldier who puts his life on the line for you people! We keep the order that saves lives! Every goddamn human being in the world would be infected if it wasn't for *us*!"

That's not strictly true, since we do see other groups of survivors out in the world. But maybe those people are just lucky that a wave of spores hasn't shown up to wash over them. Maybe a hyper-controlled, regimented system *is* the best way to reliably keep people safe. Maybe quarantine zones really are the safest hope.

The game's not called The Last Of Us for nothing -- Humankind is right on the edge. The cordyceps has effectively won. Whatever people are still clinging to the Earth are nearing statistical insignificance. They've had twenty years to right the ship, and things don't seem to be getting any better.

There are a lot of assholes in The Last Of Us, but I like how there are no obvious straw men. Every cannibal community or group of hunters has a reason for their actions. There are no good guys, and no bad guys. A lot of stories strive for that kind of balance, but the level to which The Last Of Us achieves it is pretty fucking remarkable.

Ellie's Infection

There's always a slight cut to black before a cut scene starts, and I'm not sure what that's

all about. It might be a technical necessity, or it might be a small indicator that the player is no longer in charge. Either way, it's timed really well, and I've come to like how it feels.

Some soldiers get the drop on our trio, and while being scanned, Ellie stabs the soldier in the leg and says, "Sorry!" Mighty Canadian of her. Maybe her dad was Canadian. We're very polite stabbers.

Tess and Joel are less polite as they kill all the soldiers. They see that Ellie's infection status is positive, but her wound has closed up, and she is not a monster. So the cat's out of the bag -- Ellie is immune. The gang considers this heavy news as rain droplets fall onto the screen.

I'm not sure when the tradition of water droplets sticking to the screen began. MmmmmWave Race 64? There's a lotta water in that game, and some of it mighta splashed up against the screen at some point. Then a renegade/lazy developer mighta said: "Leave that in." I should mention at this point that I have no idea how games really work.

Now we're evading soldiers in the rain. Joel can absorb a fair number of bullets, even on Survivor difficulty.

Metaphor Bullets

Getting shot in a video game is weird, because most people don't keep running around after being shot. I was thinking about this while playing Spec Ops: The Line. Don't play that game on Hard, by the way. Mechanically, it's a bit of a goddamn mess. But its storyline is realistic enough that I found myself looking for an explanation as to how I was surviving getting shot all the time.

Spec Ops has a regenerating health system, and the explanation I came up with is that when the character takes a bullet, it's more of a metaphor. He's in a dangerous position, and an enemy is going to have a bead on him at any second. So that bullet hitting him isn't actually real -- It's an exciting video game representation of danger. It's a representation of a bullet whizzing past his ear, or the hair on his arms standing up. It's like Spidey Sense. The last bullet to hit the player -- *That's* the only bullet that really hits him.

This works for The Last Of Us, as well. Any bullets that hit Joel are grazes, at most. That's why a bandage soaked in alcohol can work as a healing item -- It's only the top layer of skin that's been damaged. The metaphor breaks down when Joel takes a slug to

the chest and goes tumbling backwards. But in those cases I just assume he's carrying a lotta bibles and lighters, and those helped absorb the blow.

Evading Soldiers

Soldiers are shining their flashlights into the trenches, and sneaking past them is a bit of a bitch. It must be tough to design an environment that looks natural, but also leads players where they need to go. The markers of yellow caution-tape are a nice touch; it's plausible that they'd been left by previous insurgents.

It's taken a few restarts, but it's interesting that I've made it this far into the game without taking any damage. On my first playthrough, this game was cruelly hard. It seems like a hallmark of good game design when a player's performance can be improved in this way. Your fifth run through Dark Souls will barely resemble the first run. Whereas you could spend the rest of your life playing Mortal Kombat on the Gameboy, and it's still gonna be a weird bullshit clusterfuck.

That's right, I'm taking sides in the endless Dark Souls vs Gameboy Mortal Kombat debate. Dark Souls is way better. It just is. I'm sorry.

I read that during this outdoor segment, Tess will sometimes give Joel some bullets. That would be cool, if she did that.

The enemies mostly ignore your companions, but not entirely -- A soldier just took a few shots at Tess. I guess I already knew that, since companions sometimes need to be rescued from an Infected. Maybe it's only during stealth that they're invisible.

It's weird that the companions don't hang back further. They're always near Joel, which leads to them interacting oddly with enemies a lot more often. If they were behind Joel, it'd be less likely that we'd see whatever weird things they get up to.

No Need To Thank Me

It must be frustrating to read things like that, if you're a game developer. "OH, THANKS, CANADIAN JERK. WE NEVER THOUGHT OF THAT." The whole Bioshock: Infinite team would probably wanna spit on me if they read this book. And fuck it, I'd let them. I recognize how much work they put into that weird, dumb thing. I'm proud of them, sorta.

This is just making things worse. Let's move on.

Incidental Dialogue

I'm usually very sensitive to repetitive dialogue in video games. There can't be enough different dialogue for me. I think it's a low-level mix of OCD and misophonia -- Repetitive sounds eventually pass beyond annoyance and make me feel angry. Don't you love it when people self-diagnose, by the way? It's so charming.

Even games with boatloads of dialogue eventually come to a point when I've heard it all. I wish games had a slider, to allow you to reduce the frequency of incidental dialogue. Dialogue is one of the fastest ways for a game world to fall apart for me.

Nowadays, every game is awash in a sea of dialogue. I didn't really remember how dialogue-free games used to be, until I watched my friend Craig play Driver: San Francisco.

Driver: SF is one weird game. You can teleport spontaneously from car to car, which in the olden days would have gone entirely unexplained. It would have been the way the game worked, and that's it. In Driver, they explain that you've fallen into a coma, which has resulted in you receiving *fantastic powers!* Or, it's all a coma-dream. One of those. What the fuck ever, dude.

The point is that once that Pandora's Box of including a plot is open, they won't stop running with it, and the nattering dialogue becomes incessant. Craig was having trouble with one mission, and with each retry, the characters kept rattling off the same lines of shitty dialogue. So Craig went into the options, and turned the dialogue volume off.

The change in tone was palpable. It was like taking a long drink from a cool glass of water. Instead of Driver: SF being a weird Twilight Zone driving game, it became just a driving game, and became immediately more fun.

Back in the day, Driver would have been a regular, dialogue-free game, and that would have been fine. I remembered how I used to love driving games, and how I can still love them now, once they shut the fuck up. Storylines and dialogue are not adding to the experience, but are actually ruining games that I used to enjoy.

Another example that springs to mind is the original Dead Space. I love that game. I'd go so far as to say that I *respect* it. The way character information is integrated into the suit is genius, and the environment is so creepy and well designed... I beat that game on Hard with only the Plasma Cutter, and it was a terrifying, awesome time.

But the storyline of Dead Space -- Man, it beats me. Some kind of monolith, some religious cultists... I was trying to keep track of it. I liked that game so much, that I really

wanted to give a shit. But every time I found a text log, my eyes would glaze over. Whenever someone started talking to me, my mind would wander. I just couldn't make myself give even the littlest, tiniest fuck.

So I stopped torturing myself, and just turned off the dialogue. Turns out, Dead Space was still a great game. Turns out, being trapped on a ship filled with deadly monsters is a pretty gripping story. With the dialogue turned on, Dead Space was an alright game. But with dialogue turned off, it was A+.

A less charitable example is the 2013 Tomb Raider. I liked Uncharted a ton, so I was excited to have someone put out something similar. I thought even a b-grade version of Uncharted would be cool, but I didn't realize what fresh hell I was asking for.

A hallmark of Uncharted is that its dialogue and storyline isn't relegated to cutscenes; it's intertwined throughout. Tomb Raider uses the same technique, and fella... that game's writing is not for me. Tomb Raider is a great example of why "Good for a video game" should not be in anyone's vernacular. That writing is not "good for a video game". That writing is only good for an alternate reality, where no one had ever written a story previously. And even then, I think people might find it a little clunky.

Because Tomb Raider uses Uncharted's "continuous narrative" technique, its wacky writing and inept delivery are inescapable. It's a nonstop barrage of garbage, and I found myself clutching to whatever coping mechanisms I could devise.

At first, I tried pretending that Lara was drunk. After awhile, even inebriation couldn't explain her behavior. I started to imagine that she had suffered brain damage, and was tragically lost in the woods, verbalizing without any physical ability to stop.

That actually worked too well, to the point where it started creeping me out. I decided to turn off the dialogue, but there was only a single slider for both dialogue and sound effects. So I muted the whole thing, and put on the Heavy Metal soundtrack instead.

As a pure game, Tomb Raider doesn't work as well as Dead Space. It was okay, I guess. The last words that appear onscreen are "A SURVIVOR IS BORN", and that's pretty funny. I definitely laughed. So I'll give it points for that.

Anyway, the point I'm trying to make -- I don't know what point I'm trying to make. Let's get back to The Last Of Us.

Wait, I remember! The point I'm getting to is that when Ellie says, "Jesus, Joel!" after Joel crushes someone's windpipe, it doesn't wear on me. It seems like something that should bother me, because it happens pretty frequently. But it always seems to fit.

Again, Naughty Dog takes what I would normally think of as a bad design decision, and somehow pulls it off.

Maybe it's because the grimness of Joel's actions really does call for a reaction. Or maybe it's because the responses are so well delivered by the actors. Maybe Naughty Dog is just magical. I don't know. I honestly feel like that company is in a class of its own. I would say that *The Last Of Us* is the *Citizen Kane* of gaming, but I won't. Because *Citizen Kane* sucks. I'm calling you out, Welles.

Whazzat? He's dead? Well... good. I don't mean it like that, I just mean-- Look, let's just go on to the next segment. God damn, editors... that must be a hell of a thing.

Choke Theory

Here's something I learned while sneaking through these soldiers: During my stealth kills, I'd been pressing square continuously, in order to *really* cinch in that choke. I stopped once the rumble of the controller told me the guy was out, and not a moment before. But I just now realized that if you only press square once, Joel just keeps choking. Enemies can't break free from a choke. Good to know!

I guess I could have saved myself a lot of square-pushing, but that's in the past. All that matters is the future. And the future is gonna contain some elegant god damn choking.

Hide And Seek (With Soldiers)

My new choking discovery takes a bit of getting used to. At first, it seems weird not to pound square while I'm choking someone out. But I get comfortable with it pretty quickly, and it seems almost leisurely. I can let Joel choke people on his own, while I check on my finances or whatnot.

You can't run and slide into cover in this game, but I guess that'd just tear the shit out of Joel's pants. His old knees definitely don't need that shit. Nor, his old pants.

We make it to safety, and Tess hasn't given me any bullets. I assume that's because we made it through without starting any firefights. If I keep getting through this game unscathed, I guess Ellie won't be giving me any health packs, either.

But I'm anticipating some fights with the Infected where taking no damage will not be possible. When fighting against humans, it's only a matter of time before things go my way. But some of the shit in the Pittsburgh sewers -- I don't know what I'm gonna do

there. The school outside Bill's won't be a treat, either.

Console vs PC

I'm constantly struck by how beautiful this game looks. The PlayStation 3 is at least seven years old at the time of this writing. A seven year old PC could never manage this. A lot of modern PC games don't even look this good.

We're moving into a period where the PC seems like a better choice than a console, in a lot of ways. But there's a lot to be said for developing games within a stable environment. PC games have to accommodate a lot of different loadouts -- Even most console games have to compromise in order to run on both a PlayStation and Xbox.

A game like The Last Of Us is a rarity: Made by a developer that is known for their technological innovation, and who are able to push a single platform to its technological limit. It's crazy, what they've accomplished with such aging hardware.

It's always impressive to see Skyrim ultra-realism mods, but they still leave me with the feeling of a lot of beautiful pieces being somewhat oddly duct-taped together. The Last Of Us feels solid and complete. It's like a virus that crawled into the PlayStation 3, and expanded to take over every little corner.

It seems odd to consider buying a PlayStation 4 just for future Naughty Dog games. It would be a lot more convenient for me if they were on PC. But, they also wouldn't be as good. The stability of a console, even if it's a less powerful device, can really lead to some amazing shit.

Maybe it's a function of how having hard limitations can help in the creation of art. Yeah! Some fancy idea like that, I bet!

Capitol On The Horizon

It's pretty unusual how clearly The Last Of Us delineates its combat sections. You're in a safe part, or you're in a fighty part. They've managed to make a horror-style, pseudo-zombie game that has almost no jump scares.

Joel seems to basically believe Ellie's story of being immune, and doesn't seem to doubt that the Fireflies have their own doctors. But he's still utterly dismissive of the idea of a cure. Joel could not believe in the Fireflies less.

It's surprising how little of Joel's anti-Firefly attitude I picked up on my first playthrough. I'm not saying I should have seen the ending coming, but on reflection, it sure ain't surprising. Tess wanting to continue on is the only reason Joel is still a part of this story at all.

We see the capitol building in the distance, and there's another "press L3 to focus the camera" moment. Maybe it was a dictum passed down that control should never be taken from the player. First person games take that idea to an extreme, letting you jump all around while someone is trying to talk to you. But I don't think it's that bad to break those rules occasionally. It makes more sense that Joel would look at the capitol building, rather than not look at it. What I'm trying to say is, just do what you gotta do, game. You don't need my permission to show me something.

We crawl in the side of an old, broken office building. Tess says, "After this, we can lie low for awhile." Aw, poor Tess. I remember being sure she was gonna die, after she said that. **ONE DAY LEFT UNTIL RETIREMENT, TESS! ONE DAY!**

Backstories

During alternate playthroughs, I like to come up with backstories for characters. Joel has a pistol in his back pocket, the one I had to pick up earlier. If I can help it, that'll be his only weapon, and he'll only use it when there's literally no other option.

So what's the story there? Why is Joel so hesitant to use weapons? His daughter was killed by a gun, so that might have caused him to swear them off. You couldn't really argue with him about that.

However, that means that during the previous twenty years, while being a bandit with Tommy, and a smuggler with Tess, Joel also avoided guns. It's been a long, violent twenty years, of punching people to death and choking fools out. Carrying a pistol in his back pocket that he never, ever uses.

That's actually pretty god damn creepy.

Apocalypse Vacation

Playing on Survivor difficulty definitely makes it easier not to pick up items, because there's nothing to fucking pick up anyway. It's cartoonish, how few resources there are. And that puts me in mind of a story... Are you tired of these digressions yet? I hope not, 'cause we've got a long way to go, baybay!

One weekend, my friend Matt and I took the bus from Toronto to New York; we were only staying for a couple of days, so we had the dumb idea to not bring anything. Just a passport and whatever we had in our pockets. We'd sleep on people's floors, maybe buy a pair of socks somewhere, and head back home just before we started seeming visibly homeless.

Let me tell you folks, the border does not like that at *all* -- Crossing into another country with no luggage is not a common thing. But they let us through, and man, did it feel good. No worrying about where to put your stuff, no dragging a bag around behind you. You get off the bus, put your hands in your pockets, and walk into Manhattan. You can whistle, if you like. And that's it. You're there.

So maybe this is fun for Joel. Just walking the Earth. Whistling away.

Clickers

Joel finds a Clicker corpse embedded in a door, and pulls it free. There are a lotta spores in the air, but nobody seems too worried. Maybe that's why it doesn't matter if spores get on your clothes; maybe they need to be super-fresh. Straight from an Infected's balls, and right into your nostrils. Apocalypse!

A live Clicker then attacks Joel! Fuck, shit! He takes 2 units from my 5 unit health bar. Asshole! Cock! I wonder what happens if you get to this point with only 1 health unit? I assume Joel survives the attack, but if somebody wants to check that for me, drop me a line.

And hey, at least this violent thrashing will give Tess or Ellie a reason to scrounge me up a health pack. When a crazed monster attacks, you gotta look at the bright side. You *gotta*.

Now that Clickers have been introduced, they're gonna be a continuous part of my worthless, god-damned life. So we're sneaking past a couple of the motherfuckers. I like how you have to crawl suuuuper slowly... crawling at top speed can still get you spotted. It really makes things feel tense.

The Clickers' one-hit kill also makes things pretty intense. I don't think the Clicker bite is the literal moment of Joel's death, the way the other death animations are. The way Clickers tear the flesh from Joel's neck is pretty bad, but not as bad as the other deaths. Maybe the Clicker attack is just shorthand for "You've been infected, and are therefore functionally dead. So Game Over, bucko."

Another shorthand Game Over is when a companion dies. Realistically, Joel carries on from there. Me and Matt had an idea for when Ellie dies: The game should cut to a scene of Joel in the future, sitting at a table by himself. He's eating a meal, looking sad. Then he stands on a chair, fashions a noose, and hangs himself. Then the game waits on that scene for a long, long time. Also, it should be unskippable.

Feel free to hire us to design your game. We're not doing anything.

Insta-Kill

The Clickers' one hit kill not only makes the game more intense, but also supports the fiction of how the cordyceps virus managed to take over the world. It don't matter how fast a zombie can run, those jerks ain't taking over the world. The spore system seems more plausible, and these Clickers are demonstrably bad motherfuckers.

I was surprised to learn that the Clickers only became one-hit kill enemies a week before the first major Last Of Us demo. For the first and possibly only time, I remember the source of this information: Steve Gaynor's Tone Control podcast. Neil Druckmann talked about some different iterations of Last Of Us, like how there was originally an evade button. Players learned that the best strategy was to wait for an attack, then evade, and it killed a lot of the tension, so they removed it. At some point, somebody tried making the Clickers ultra-dangerous, and the decision stuck.

The design of The Last Of Us seems very tight and deliberate, so it's interesting to hear how it was subject to the same design chaos as every other game. If it's a miracle that movies ever turn out well, with all of their disparate parts, it must be a double-miracle when a game comes together. That's all you need to make a great big-budget game: An amazing idea, a cadre of geniuses, and at least one double-miracle. No problem.

Areas Unloading

As soon as we climb over the barrier, away from the Clickers, their clicking sounds immediately stop. That actually happens quite a lot in this game. The most obvious instance is in the underpass at the very end of the game -- That place is loaded with Infected, but as soon as you climb over the truck to escape the section, all of their sounds immediately stop.

I assume that's because of the PS3's limited memory, the game having to dump everything that's behind you in preparation for what's coming up. But it is a bit jarring.

First Major Encounter With The Infected

We come to the first major roadblock -- The section of the building where Joel drops down on his own, and has to kill some Infected before the group can progress. There are a few Runners and a Clicker, and this is actually a great example of why people *don't* play games on Hard difficulty. On my first playthrough, this fight took me something like sixteen tries. I was getting pretty frustrated, and finally decided to sleep on it. Then the next day, I beat it with no problem.

This is where I think Naughty Dog games can make a certain type of person especially annoyed. Because Uncharted and The Last Of Us have stories that people actually want to see, getting waylaid by bad guys can become hard to tolerate. Having to sleep on a fight should be no big deal, and for an old-school game, that kind of challenge would only be natural. You're not supposed to walk into each situation as some kind of demigod, you're supposed to slowly get better.

But if you're playing a game mainly for its story, and don't want to take the time to master a game's mechanics, then situations like this are really gonna grate. I don't really have any sympathy for those folk -- If you want a movie, then watch a fucking movie. I'm just saying that I get it, bro. I understand your childish, entitled feelings.

Hardcore Games

I actually kinda liked how brutal The Last Of Us felt during that first playthrough. It seemed so oppressive, and so relentlessly bleak, that I eventually started to question if the people in this situation should even keep fighting. Is it worth staying in this world, let alone trying to save it?

The Last Of Us is an emotionally draining game to play, and is definitely not what I'd call a traditionally fun experience. But that just adds to its genius. In a time when big budget games are often criticized for being guided tours, and criticized for a lack of innovation in general, The Last Of Us walks some weird goddamn lines.

The Last Of Us isn't usually described as a hardcore game, but I think it kind of is. Hardcore games have an initially crushing difficulty curve, but that difficulty leads them to become more satisfying than their contemporaries. Far Cry 2, Demons' Souls, Spelunky, Nethack... Those aren't games most people would speak of in the same breath as The Last Of Us. But it's my book, so I will: If you crank up the difficulty on The Last Of Us, it is one hardcore survival game. Now it's been said. So there. Good, then.

Joel vs Clicker

The Runners should be no serious problem, but now that I'm in the Super Apocalypse, I'm not sure how to deal with this Clicker. I can't punch him, so I might have to bend the rules and pick up a melee weapon. Or I could use some of my precious bullets.

I skipped picking up the revolver on the way here. I always wondered what would happen if I didn't pick up the various weapons in the game. Will they show up again later? Will they magically be added to my inventory the next time I die? Or are they just gone?

I still can't get used to the idea that the Infected can't see my flashlight, so I keep it off, just to put myself at ease. Goddamn, the fucking Infected are creepy. The way they lurch around, the sounds they make... They're so erratic, and when you get into a fist-fight with them, it seems fairly random as to who will land the first blow. I can't make any mistakes, or everyone will start running at me. It's pretty late at night as I'm playing this, the house is empty, and I'm feeling a bit nervous.

Five seconds after writing that I fucked up, alerted an Infected and got killed. Fuck.

Infected are much, much harder to deal with than human opponents. I'm getting destroyed. I'm trying to remember my two Dark Souls mantras: Slower Is Faster, and It's Only Difficult Until You've Done It. Keep the faith. Stay calm. Slowly take these guys out until it's just me and the Clicker. Then, beat his brains in.

Are these Stalkers or Runners? I'll be honest, I have no idea what the difference is. The Last Of Us wiki says Stalkers are rare, so I guess these ain't them. I think Stalkers are the enemies who always seem to hear you creeping up. Who knows? I guess the guy who's writing a whole book about this dang game should know. But, I'm afraid I do not.

Holy shit, these pricks are hard. I manage to kill all the Runners, and the Clicker is stumbling around. I should pick up a crowbar and bash his head in, but I read on the wiki that you can sometimes get up to three punches on a Clicker before he kills you. Could I punch him in the back of the head and just run away?

I give it a go -- I sneak up behind him, carefully, carefully... and he fucking eats my neck immediately. So fuck that. I'm gonna bash this fucker's head in good.

There's another revolver in this arena. So that confirms that if you miss a weapon, the game must keep seeding them throughout.

Keith Cheats (And Feels Disappointed In Himself)

After about ten tries, it's down to me and the Clicker. I should really just shoot the prick. But I really wanna save my bullets for the Bloater in the high school gym, and punching this fucker does not seem to be working.

So, weak man that I am, I grab a 2x4 from the ground and finish him off. It takes four hits to drop him, and the board then breaks apart in my hands. So that worked out pretty cleanly. But I broke my Super Apocalypse rules! I picked up a board!

Get it together, Keith! There have to be other ways! When you get to the Ellie section, you can pick up whatever you want. But no more of this "just one 2x4" shit. I'm giving you this one, and that's *it!* Shape up, soldier!

Subway

In celebration of my manly victory, Tess gives me the components to craft a health kit. She doesn't know the shame I brought on myself and my ancestors by picking up a piece of wood. So I shan't craft it. It's time to get back into the spirit of this ridiculous endeavor.

The real time item creation and inventory management system in this game is so cool. I'm basically sidestepping it during this playthrough, which is one reason I wouldn't actually recommend this playthrough to anyone. Crafting on the fly is fun; rummaging through your backpack for a gun is fun. Salivating at the idea of picking up a stick -- Less fun.

We head down into an abandoned subway tunnel, where a bunch of Clickers are spread around. While sneaking, my impulse is still to press the stick harder, to get away from them faster. Even after all the times I've played this game, Clickers still scare me. One could shamble up behind me and get an instant kill, at any moment. But I can't press harder, or they'll hear me. It's like I'm in a nightmare, where I'm trying to get away, but I can only move very slowly. That one little mechanic of the slow-crawl is so genius.

At the end of the subway tunnel, there's a ladder laying on top of a wall. It can't be pulled down until the nearby Clicker is led away. I spend some time messing around with him -- It turns out you *can* punch a Clicker and still run away, as long as he's unaware of you. So maybe I could have punched that last Clicker to death, if I had immediately run away and hid. But once a Clicker is in a frenzy, I don't know if you can punch them at all.

In this case, attacking the Clicker makes every other enemy go insane, so that's out of the question. This is basically a tutorial, so I think I'm guilt-free in picking up another item. There's a brick and a molotov on the floor, and the molotov will surely wake everyone up. Let's try it.

The molotov kills the Clicker, and attracts one other Clicker. He runs over to investigate, and sets himself on fire as well. Good enough for me.

It just occurred to me that I could have made a molotov out of the health kit ingredients Tess gave me, instead of picking up the one on the ground. Fuck! I keep fucking up my own playthrough! This book is called *The Super Apocalypse*, not *The Pick-Up-A-Stick-And-A-Molotov-Jamboree!* Christ!

I had a girlfriend who claimed my predilection toward shame was due to my Catholic upbringing. I thought that sounded a bit reductive. But hey, you never know.

We climb the ladder and head down an alley, where Joel starts opening a garage door. Tess hears some zombies a-shamblin' and says, "Okay, double-time." I think that one little command sums up Joel and Tess' relationship: Joel is not good at managing his own life. He wants someone like Tess to steer the ship. She gives commands, and he follows.

After Tess dies, it must be crushingly difficult for Joel to look after Ellie on his own. And later, when it becomes clear that Ellie can look after herself, and is in fact capable of helping Joel manage his life, Joel must feel bound to Ellie even more. But surely nothing bad will come of that. Bonding! It's nice!

The Museum

I pass up some pills, and spit at a workbench as I walk by. Really, life without items isn't going so badly. Games always give you more resources than you need, and it kinda blows my mind to realize that I could have avoided both the 2x4 and molotov that I picked up. I was getting nervous, acting as though my back was against the wall. But in fact, I had the resources I needed with me already. This is totally do-able. I've just gotta relax, man.

Hoarding

I've always been a hoarder in games. I'm the guy who would get to the end of Final Fantasy II on the SNES with 99 of everything, because I was saving them all for a rainy

day that never came. I like the limited inventory of Last Of Us, as it forces you to use what you have. It give the game a better flow, and forces players not to act so compulsive and desperate. The freedom of being constrained! Zen, dude. Intergalactic ninja, *dude*.

The Uncharted Connection

This museum looks a bit like the museum in Uncharted 3. The bar from Uncharted 3's intro shows up later, in Pittsburgh. Uncharted 3 also has a newspaper with a headline that mentions a strange fungal outbreak.

These are just little nods to the fact that both games were in development concurrently, and not intended as literal connections between the worlds. But it's weird to think that, right after Uncharted 3, maybe Drake started sprouting shit from his head and died, along with everyone else on Earth. That would take some wind out of the sails of that franchise, that's for sure.

There's also an Uncharted board game in Pittsburgh. So, that makes The Last Of Us the dominant universe, right? Uncharted is just a game, in the *harsh reality of The Last Of Us*. When people die here, it's not some weird demon-dream.

Clusterfuck At The Museum

Some Infected get the drop on us, and this is where Tess gets bitten. Long sleeves and turtlenecks, guys. And some gloves. Maybe a custom fitted, turtleneck-style leather jacket. It might not be comfortable, but it'd stop some bites, and maybe some people wouldn't be dead. That's really all you can ask for in a jacket.

This run-in with the Infected leads to a full-blown fight, and Holy. God Damn. Fuck.

There are about five Runners, who are all angry and yelling, and three more that come through the window midway through the battle. It's a total clusterfuck, and I quickly accept that I'm gonna have to take damage.

Then, after a few tries, I make it most of the way without a scratch, and start to think that I might be able to pull this off. I use the magical rule of The Last Of Us, which is that you can outrun almost anything. There's very limited space in this museum, but there might be a way through this.

I put on a podcast and zone the fuck out. I play the fight over and over, for about twenty

minutes straight. It turns out that it's not too hard to get the drop on a Runner; you just have to throw your punch really early. If another Infected is behind you, or beside you, you'll take phantom damage from them slashing at you, even if you can't see them. Or, you'll get grabbed outright. So fighting in the open doesn't work. But if you can get a single Infected near a wall or bookcase, Joel will smash their head right into it. Then you can run like a fucking deer, and try to find another advantageous situation.

So I run around this room, waiting for times when enemies are alone, rushing over to rescue Tess or Ellie when need be. I use what I learned from trying to punch that Clicker -- A fistfight doesn't have to be to the death. You can give one or two quick punches, then just run the fuck away.

It's a total mess of a fight, and I'm sure there's a lot of luck involved. The reason I'm sure of that is because it takes about fifty tries before I make it through untouched. But I do it. I somehow take out all of these crazy bastards with only my fists, and without taking any damage.

Game Within A Game

You might think that trying to perfectly complete this battle with only my fists is a massively pointless waste of time. And of course it is. But I like to think of it as a throw-back, to the way video games used to be.

The multimedia-extravaganza, storytelling form of video games is a relatively new thing. Games used to be almost entirely about a mechanical challenge, and I still liked those. In some ways, I liked them more. I wasn't playing to see the next cutscene, or to learn about a story. I was playing the game to get better at playing the game.

Imagine an alternate world, where video game technology improved, but games never developed elaborate stories. What if this were one of those games? It could be called "Zombie Museum", and the goal would be to punch out zombies. You couldn't get hurt, because you'd become a zombie, so it'd be a really hard game. But shit, I'd play that. I played My Hero on the Sega Master System about five hundred times, and Zombie Museum is way more fun than that.

As I've said, I think it's a focus on the overall story that makes being stuck frustrating. When you focus on a single fight as its own activity, playing it over and over again is fun. It's like a fluid puzzle, and the goal is to find a way through.

Fluid Puzzles

One reason I hate conventional puzzles in video games is because they're so rigid. The whole game stops cold while I try to figure out which way to turn a statue with an emblem of a penguin on it. That stuff drives me nuts.

But figuring out how to get through a room full of enemies is also a puzzle. It's a fluid puzzle, and it takes a different kind of thinking to solve. Spending twenty minutes thinking through a rigid, conventional puzzle is totally unacceptable to me. It's torture. The payoff is not remotely worth the effort. But a fluid puzzle, such as a real-time, reflex-based combat puzzle, is fun to spend twenty minutes trying to solve.

That kind of fast-paced, interactive-combat puzzle is also something that's unique to video games. I guess it could be simulated in reality with a mass-shooting, but I think we can agree that mass-shootings fall outside the traditional definition of a "puzzle". We can all agree on that, right? If you can't, try to talk to someone about it. Do not shoot people. DO NOT. I can't stress that enough. Try shooting them a smile instead. See how that feels? Pretty good, right? There you go. You're alright.

Far Cry 2? Far Cry 2

In difficult games, hyper-focusing on individual sections, and treating each as its own game, can be a very effective technique. In crazy hard games, that segmentation can get pretty heavy. For example, in Far Cry 2 on its hardest difficulty, a mission is not a mission. A mission is more like thirty missions.

Getting to the road is a mission. Waiting for a truck is a mission. Waiting patiently, in a video game, is a surprisingly hard mission. Commandeering that truck is a mission. Driving to the next fork in the road is a mission.

Everything needs to be compartmentalized, and treated as the most important aspect of what's going on. You can't expend mental resources thinking about the end of the chain, or even the next link in the chain. Whatever's happening right now is all that's important. And that's why hard games are cool. Far Cry 3 was fun, but there's no way it got that intense for anybody, ever.

Rhodium Trophy

After accomplishing the crazy stunt of punching out all the museum zombies without taking damage, I realize that I may be the only person who's ever done that. Not because

of its difficulty -- If a request went out, there'd be two thousand videos of it on YouTube tomorrow. But who else would try this? What would lead them to it? It's obscure enough a task that I honestly might be the only one. I don't care how dumb an accomplishment it is, that still feels pretty cool.

I'll bask in that glory for a few moments, before I go check YouTube. 3...2...1...

On YouTube, several people have done no damage runs. But they're all picking up items. Sure, they're not taking any damage. But they're also shooting the shit out of people. They have bricks. As discussed earlier, Joel can murderize anything with a brick. I really think I might be the only one dumb enough to have done this two-fisted. And in a mere fifty tries! Magical.

The Capitol Building

3/5 health
4 9mm bullets
1 unit cloth
1 unit alcohol

We get out of that fucking shitbag museum, and walk across a plank between buildings, heading toward the capitol building. Joel looks down at his broken watch, the watch his daughter gave him on the day she died. I never really noticed that glance, until someone else pointed it out. But once you see it, it's a nice moment.

As we near the capitol building, Ellie says, "Um, just so it's out there... I can't swim." You sure can't, Ellie. You sure can't. But I'm sure it won't cause any issues.

The Fireflies aren't at the capitol building, and Tess scrambles to try to figure out where they might be. Joel raises his voice -- "It is *over*, Tess!" -- showing just how uninvested he is in helping find this cure. He's even willing to yell at his boss, which I reckon he doesn't do too often.

But Tess feels the opposite way. She reveals that she's been bitten, and that this girl must, *absolutely* be taken safely to the Fireflies. Once Tess sees the spark of salvation, it takes ahold of her pretty hard.

Joel vs Tess

We all know that we're gonna die, and we generally ignore that fact. We live our lives like they're not gonna end; it would be hard to function if we couldn't block out the truth of our own mortality.

Being in the waning days of humanity must feel like that, except the feeling is spread out over the entire species. You know that it's gonna be over, soon. But all you can do is put it out of your head, and carry on.

Coming across a potential cure must feel a bit like finding a method for immortality. Every day, you're ignoring the fact that you have to die. Then suddenly, you feel that weight go away. You see a future where you don't have to die. If there was a chance, even the smallest chance that you could supersede death, nothing else would feel even remotely as important.

I imagine that's how Tess must feel. Every day, she was living with the knowledge that

her species was about to flicker out. Then, out of nowhere, there's an escape. There's a way that the human race could keep on living. If this cure works, then we don't have to die. As a species, we can keep going. We can be back to how we used to be, pretending that we'll live forever.

Clinging to that hope is a natural reaction -- Even for someone as hardened as Tess, potential salvation would become all-encompassing. What's maybe more notable isn't that Tess falls so easily under the thrall of a cure; it's that Joel doesn't. Even with a demonstrably immune person standing right in front of him, he still doesn't care. He just wants to go back to his regular life, and to wait for everybody to die.

That attitude seems pretty monstrous, and I'll bring up many times throughout this book how Joel is a really shitty person. But his attitude is also something I can empathize with. A human on this earth killed his daughter, and if that's what humans do, then fuck them. Something truly irreplaceable has been taken from his life, so to Joel, all the people he's killed in the interim are just payback. None of humankind deserves to be here, so killing them doesn't mean much. And eventually, mother nature will complete the process, and everyone will be gone for good.

As super-fucked-up as that is, I kinda can't blame the guy. If most of the people in the ensuing twenty years have been exploitative scavengers, killing each other in some pointless bid for temporary survival, then what reason would he have for wanting to save them? The idea of humanity being washed away might seem like a calming proposition. The animals could have the Earth, and all of this could be done.

Tess's Death

Tess's character arc is a little hard to see, but I really like it. It only sunk in for me in hindsight -- During the game proper, Tess's characterization as the baddest badass in badass town can obscure her true personality. She's tough, she's in charge, and a thousand other stories with characters like that have taught us that that's probably all we'll need to know about her.

We also don't have much time to think about Tess. We don't really get to meet her until this moment, and then we're already on the run, leaving her behind. Tess's sacrifice doesn't help Joel and Ellie much. It's more about her wanting a clean exit, to avoid becoming an Infected. Soldiers are coming, and it's better to end it now, while she has the nerve. Death by cop. If Tess held on, and stayed with Joel and Ellie, one of them would soon have to kill her. It's a kindness, that she's not willing to put either of them through that.

As I've said, the more I play The Last Of Us, the more I agree with Joel's view of the Fireflies -- Their brand of hope arguably only makes life harder. With that in mind, it's doubly sad to see Tess's final moments. Just like everyone else, she wants to believe. She wants the notion of hope to be real, she wants to be redeemed. But all she has to hold on to are the Fireflies.

Fucking With The Boundaries

Joel and Ellie leave Tess behind to get shot by soldiers, and it's very sad. But let's spring immediately back to game-testing mode: If instead of running forward, you run back toward Tess's body, it really messes with the enemy spawning. They start popping up in weird places that don't really make sense.

On my first playthrough I did what the game wanted, running up the stairs and along the prescribed path. But the second time, I had to try messing with the system. I blame Metroid for impulses like that: After Metroid, we all had to try going left in every game, forever. What if there was something back there, and we missed it? What if going back to Tess's body revealed some great secret? It didn't, it just made the game behave oddly. But I had to try it.

Infection Philosophy

If I were infected by the cordyceps virus, I think I'd let myself progress, rather than kill myself. I'd be like that guy in Dawn of the Dead who said, "I'm gonna try not to come back". Sure, no one else has ever managed it. But it's like going left in Metroid; there's probably nothing there, but you gotta try.

If your consciousness were still intact inside your infected body, that would be pretty horrifying. But given the severity of what the cordyceps does to the brain, literally splitting the skull open, it seems unlikely that there's any human consciousness left.

So yeah, fuck it. Give it a try. Maybe I'd be like Fawkes from Fallout 3, a rare case of an intelligent monster. I could be sitting there with a fungus growing out of my head, sipping on a cup of tea, talking about Metroid. You never know until you try.

Escaping The Capitol Building

Joel and Ellie run past the hunting rifle, which is hands down my favorite gun. Doing the little zoom-in, getting a shaky bead on some jerk's head, and BANG! I'm sad to see you

go, pardner.

The next group of soldiers takes me a few tries, but it's nothing compared to that museum shit show. Good old humans, all hesitant and cautious. Even with their guns, they're so much easier to deal with than the Infected.

One of the especially gamey aspects of The Last Of Us is that ammunition is abnormally scarce. People who should definitely have ammo on their corpses usually do not. It's easy to use some bullets to kill a guy, and not get any back in return. It's artificial, but I like it. It nudges the player toward using other strategies besides guns, and adds to the overall sense of desperation.

What I'm trying to say is that none of these guys are carrying shit. They brought exactly as many bullets as they thought they would need that day, and not a single bullet more.

Downstairs are more soldiers, and I clear out the first batch with no trouble. But there are two or three soldiers left in the last room. I sit watching them, but they don't seem to want to break up. Throwing bottles can break enemies of their pre-set patrol routes, causing them to move into other areas. But I can use no bottles.

I keep watching them, and I look at the exit door. And I watch them. I know that if I screw this up, I'll have to do the whole section over again. But, fuck it. I'm tired of watching these jerks.

I book it, running for the door as fast as I can. I get outside and run down into the subway, leaving the yelling soldiers in the dust. Thank god Ellie can look after herself, because I basically just left her behind.

But it worked! I've never snuck past this section before, and it's great to learn that it's possible. This is what alternate playthroughs are all about -- Twisting the game mechanics in order to force some risky, unusual decisions. Man, it feels good that I pulled that off. Eat it, soldier boys.

Heading Underground

Joel and Ellie enter the spore-filled subway tunnel, and spot two soldiers searching for them. Ellie pulls Joel into cover, and he realizes that she's not wearing a gas mask. She's the real deal. To celebrate, he kills both soldiers and thinks curse words about them.

Being down in these spore filled subway tunnels, the game looks so spacey and drifty. This game runs at thirty frames per second, because that's the most they could squeeze

out of the PS3. But I really think it looks cool. In film, a higher frame rate always looks worse. It makes things look like they're shot on video. That's not generally the case for video games, but thirty frames still looks pretty good. The PS4 version cranks things up, but on PS3, I've got no complaints.

There's a smuggler's note in this tunnel which mentions a guy named Frank. He's been trading with people from Boston, and now wants to get into the Boston QZ. But he never showed up to the meeting. Could this be Bill's partner Frank? Once Frank split from Bill, heading into Boston would make sense.

Frank also had a working car, so his plan may have been to hit the road. But leaving on your own has gotta be pretty scary. Maybe the community of Boston seemed more appealing, despite the military presence. Either way, Frank was destined to miss this meeting, being as he's dead.

The subway tunnel is partially submerged, and Joel's swimming controls are surprisingly intuitive. Maybe it's because his body moves into positions closer to what a real swimmer would, rather than staying straight as an arrow. Bad swimming can be brutal. Remember swimming in the original Tomb Raider? If not, then assume it was beautiful, and sleep restfully. There's no need for you to know of the horrors that our generation had to overcome.

Ellie cannot swim, so she rides on her first pallet. People complain about the frequency of these pallet puzzles, but I really don't think they're so bad. Just get into it! Look at how nervous she is, afraid that the pallet's gonna tip over. It's kinda charming. Though the pallet would probably be more stable if she didn't leap onto it like a maniac.

We make our way back to the surface; Ellie does this goonie little walk on the way out of the subway, gathering her resolve to try to apologize about what happened to Tess.

Ellie's Personality

It's hard to qualify exactly why, but I really buy Ellie as a character. She doesn't seem like a male character transposed into a female body, like a lot of "tough" female characters are. She's not overly girly, but she's not Ghost World snarky either. She just seems like a person.

Extremely smart or extremely dumb characters are always paper-thin (helloooooo, anime); Ellie is intelligent, but only to a level that makes her seem unique, and slightly weird. She seems a bit out of touch with her gender, which could be a result of growing up in such a harsh environment. It's difficult to even describe. She's just goddamn good.

[Note: It's interesting to see how I viewed Ellie's gender identity before the release of Left Behind. I seemed to be sort of on the right track. But, we'll get there.]

With some characters, I'm dying to learn more about them. I want to see what makes them tick. They're ciphers, representatives for some larger issue, or personifications of a psychological condition, and their circuit is aching to be completed.

This might sound counter-intuitive, but I'm less drawn toward learning about Ellie. I feel like seeing her behavior is all the information I need. She's not a cipher; she's not a storyline walking around, waiting to be unraveled. She's a lot more complicated than that.

Ellie's character isn't going to be summed up with one action, or one revelation. Who she is is already right there. Instead of feeling a drive to "discover" her, or understand what she's all about, I just want to let her be. My mind wants to treat her as a person, rather than as a story. It's a pretty amazing thing, and something that I don't feel about characters very often.

I gotta assume that Ellie's realism has a lot to do with the actress Ashley Johnson. Maybe Neil Druckmann is the most super-genius writer ever -- He's clearly pretty god-damn good. But for a character to turn out this well, it's gotta be something more fundamental than that. I've come to respect acting a lot -- The right expression, and the right intonation can tell more of a story than any monologue could hope to.

Ellie's Apology

Ellie tries to apologize for her part in Tess's death, but Joel doesn't listen for very long. He says, "We can just keep our histories to ourselves." Ellie agrees without complaint, saying she'll follow whatever Joel says.

But the look on Joel's face is so pissed. He wants a way out of this. Maybe he's angry that Ellie wasn't more petulant. If she had mouthed off to him in that moment, with Tess's death fresh on his mind, he might have been able to justify cutting her loose. But she demurred, not giving Joel an excuse to kick her to the curb.

Facial Expressions

The facial expressions in this game are insane. I love old school graphics -- Out Of This World is one of my favorite games, and Kentucky Route Zero looks awesome to me. Abstraction goes a long way toward successful video game storytelling. But you just

can't deny these graphics. Christ, they're good. The Last Of Us looks literally better than a movie.

George Lucas used to talk about digitally altering takes, to tweak facial expressions. In his hands, it sounded like a bad joke. But that's basically what a modern video game is. Different takes can be seamlessly stitched together, cameras and lighting can be altered at any time. As a result, these takes are perfect, and these expressions are flawless. It sounds like the premise of a Twilight Zone episode -- We've used computers to perfect the production of drama, but where is the humanity? How long until the ROBOTS ARE MAKING THE SOAP OPERAS FOR US?? And how long before they EAT US?????

But whatever, because it fucking works. The uncanny valley has got a big bridge strung across it. You can drive trucks across and shit.

Between A Psychopath And A Hard Place

Ellie doesn't talk back to Joel, but she looks very uncomfortable. As an audience, we're inclined to accept this pairing just because it's the story that's been pre-sold to us. Ellie and Joel are the people on the box, so this is what the game is about.

But thinking of the situation from Ellie's perspective, she is not in a good place. All she really knows about this guy is that he's a smuggler and a murderer, whose partner has just fucking died. And she's gotta follow this guy, into the wilderness, where she's never been? That's fucking terrifying, man.

Outside The City

We jump ahead, to the woods outside of Boston, and I've got full life again! Nice! I didn't expect that.

Ellie asks Joel why he doesn't take her back to Marlene. Joel says Marlene's not necessarily gonna make it, and that getting back into the city is nigh-impossible. That's a pretty good explanation; it probably is easier to keep sallying forth toward Bill, than it is to go back.

We find our first re-enforced spike-pipe, which I don't pick up. Why wouldn't Joel pick that up? Because he just wants to strangle. He wants to use his bare hands, all the time. Feeling better yet, Ellie? This guy ain't just a murderer. He's a *boutique* murderer.

Joel admits that he's never been here, as Bill has always come to them. That adds credence to the "Joel can't get them back inside" idea. He might not even know how. Joel is barely outside of Boston, and is already in over his head.

The game keeps nagging me to press the select button to craft, since I still haven't made that health kit Tess gave me the supplies for. Maybe I should craft one just so that damn icon will go away.

Bill's Town

We cross into Bill's town proper, and Ellie starts getting more talkative. She hums as we look around. Maybe her first time being in the woods gave her a little boost.

Abandoned Buildings

If you look online for pictures of abandoned buildings, they look just like the buildings in The Last Of Us. Their basic shape remains, but nature reclaims structures amazingly quickly. It's fucking scary how fast things fall apart, but is also really fascinating. That's one reason I love the feeling of this game so much -- It's amazing to walk through this world where everything is falling apart.

If you look at pictures of abandoned buildings for long enough, you start to get a sense of how transient your life really is. None of this stuff is gonna last. If structures aren't constantly maintained, or replaced with something new, they crumble.

Of course, the people who used to live in these places are gone too. It's a nice trick of the

human brain, how we don't think very often about how soon we're gonna die. In fact, if you bring it up, people get real up in arms about it. They say it's juvenile to focus on death.

But I don't think juvenile is the right word, to describe something so incredibly terrifying. It's an idea that's so enormous, you can only get little glimpses of it. You only have little moments when you really see how short your life is gonna be. And after that, you're gonna be a dead body, forever.

Even that's romanticizing the situation. Your body ain't gonna last that long. Thinking about this shit is the most scary thing in the world. Thank fucking christ it's so easy to ignore it. If I was constantly, fully aware that I was gonna die, I wouldn't be writing a book about a goddamn video game, I'll tell you that. I don't know what I'd be doing. Probably clubbing in people's skulls and eating their brains.

I'd definitely try out the brain-eating life. I'd give it a solid couple of weeks, and see how I felt about it from there. But it'd be weird, is the point. If we really thought about what these abandoned buildings signify, we'd all go fucking insane.

Oral Tradition

Ellie sees an arcade machine, and starts telling Joel about it. She hasn't played the game, but she heard about it, from her friend Riley.

In the American Dreams prequel comic, Ellie and Riley are exploring an old mall at night. They go into an abandoned arcade, and talk about old games they couldn't possibly have played.

It's cool to see games being passed on that way, as a kind of oral tradition. I could see that happening. Ellie doesn't know about ice cream trucks, because who would talk about them? "You remember those trucks that sold ice cream?" Of course that wouldn't come up. But I like the idea that video games are so gripping that people continue talking about them.

American Dreams

Spin-offs are almost always weird, and comic book spin-offs in particular rarely catch the tone of the original work. The American Dreams prequel comic seemed that way to me at first. I like Faith Erin Hicks' art, but it seemed a bit cartoony for a chronicle of the apocalypse.

Then I re-framed it as a chronicle of Ellie's memories, rather than a direct retelling of events. That shift in perception made the comic work much better for me. When Ellie thinks back to earlier times in her life, it's reasonable that they might seem like a comic book.

The idea of re-framing often helps me out. The Shawshank Redemption is my favorite movie. (Close second: Ginger Snaps.) But Shawshank does have a somewhat unreal, operatic tone.

At some point I realized that the tone is because Shawshank is not a direct retelling of events. It's a representation of Red's memories. So of course the guards are heartless, the Warden is cruel, and Andy is larger than life. That's how Red saw things.

Neat, right? I probably didn't come up with that theory, I probably read it somewhere. But until you can prove that *in a court of law*, or with a *simple Google search*, I'm gonna keep using it.

Light Jogging

I like how Joel has varied running speeds. During fights, he really books it. But during exploratory downtime, he doesn't move very quickly. It helps set the pace, letting the player know that they should be exploring, and soaking in the visuals. It's easy for a video game environment to seem unreal, when the player is darting all around it like a crazy person.

Tone Control

Every once in awhile, Ellie sings a little heavy-metal-riff. It'd be very easy for that to seem cloying; it's the kind of thing I can't imagine finding endearing in any other game.

But Naughty Dog breaks my preconceptions, constantly. Any rule can be broken, if you're talented enough. Ellie's singing seems legit, like she's just a weird teenager with impulses she has a hard time keeping under wraps. If a song has been running through her head all day, and she's feeling fairly safe and a bit excited at seeing the outside world, that song's gonna slip out.

God damn, Naughty Dog. I love you so much. You folk make me happy.

I love that I can get so into this story, despite my adulthood status. It was a lot easier to get invested in stories when I was younger. If I'm bored by something, I try to remind

myself that I probably would have liked it when I was sixteen. But The Last Of Us totally works for me.

Swearing

People have commented on how often Ellie swears, which is something else that, if you don't mind me saying, absolutely marks you as a weird, repressed American. Maybe other countries are hung up about swearing too, but 'round Canada, that puritan stuff is a fully American attitude.

Swearing is possibly the dumbest, most pointless thing in the world to get in a twist over. When I meet someone who gets upset about swearing, I feel like they've been the victim of parental abuse. They've been taught to feel uncomfortable and attacked by something that absolutely does not matter. Those poor fuckfaces.

What's great about Ellie's swearing is that when she's really surprised, she doesn't swear. When a Clicker sets off one of Bill's tripwires, Ellie says, "Whoa, nelly!" Haha. Nice.

Exploring Bill's Town

This crafting notice is driving me nuts. I'm about to craft a health kit, but I realize I can also craft a molotov. With a molotov, and my four bullets... can I kill that Bloater in the gym? I know he takes extra damage after being set on fire. I'll have to melee the other Infected around him, but it might be enough. Molotov it is. My crafting inventory is now empty, and I've crafted my first ever molotov.

There's the bow. There's Joel walking past the bow.

We find a building off the main path that can be explored, and Ellie comments, "You're gonna go in there?" I love the way the characters react to the environment. She's right, there's really no reason to go in that place, especially since I'm not picking up items. But I go inside anyway, just to hear their dialogue.

Inside is a note from Ezra to Rachel, which says he'll meet her in the quarantine zone. Ellie asks if he thinks they ever found each other, and Joel says, How the hell would he know? Ellie says she'd like to think they did. It's interesting that Joel doesn't deny the possibility. He just wants to stay out of it entirely.

Outside I have to pick up a bottle, to get past some tripwires. To be crazy hardcore, I guess I could have just walked into them. I thought I was doing a pretty severe play-

through, but I keep thinking of ways I could make it even harder. The super-duper apocalypse. The whoah nelly apocalypse.

I use a brick to get past the next set of tripwires. That second time was probably necessary, since I don't think I could survive walking into two tripwires. Unless I walked into the first tripwire, used Tess's supplies to create a health kit, use that, and then walk through the second tripwire. Dammit! I keep thinking of these solutions while I'm editing, so it's too late to go back.

Ellie was standing wicked close to the explosion, and she got knocked back pretty far. If she could die from environmental hazards, I bet she would have right there. Imagine how that would feel for Joel. "I met this girl who was immune to the cordyceps. I wasn't sure if I believed it or not. But then I set off a tripwire while she was standing too close. So... I don't know. Let's just keep our histories to ourselves, alright?"

Message From The Future:

As I continue through this playthrough, these early item-gathering indiscretions will continue to weigh on me. Between the 2x4, a molotov, and these two bricks, that's a full four times that I broke my own "no-item" rule.

In hindsight, I could have avoided picking up all of these items. Honestly, I think this itemless playthrough actually kind of scared me. I didn't know if I could do it, so until I got more comfortable with the playstyle, I didn't stay as orthodox as I could have.

If these little inconsistencies bother you as much as they bother me, don't worry -- Redemption is coming. I will eventually re-play these areas and confirm that they are completable without picking up items. So if you're feeling the itch of some second-hand OCD, don't worry. Before this book is over, I am gonna right these wrongs.

Bill's Trap

Joel's leg gets caught in Bill's fridge trap, leaving him hanging upside down. A tutorial for weapon slotting comes up. That's weird timing. And I've only got one weapon, dude. So I don't know what that's all about.

Joel has infinite bullets while hanging upside down, so maybe I'll come out of this with some extra ammo. I notice that if you let the Infected run right up to you, they'll never hurt you. You push them off, and the game lines up an automatic headshot afterward. So that's what I do. One, two, three, four... there go all my bullets. The game doesn't show

your ammo levels during this encounter, so you can't see the inventory fudging that's going on. I'll have to try to reload right before the end of the encounter, so I don't come out of with even fewer bullets than my initial four.

Note: The "letting the Infected run straight at you" strategy does not, of course, work with Clickers. Time for attempt number two.

Having all my stats at zero, my weapon sway is brutal. But I really do think this is better. Games are better when they're fucking with you. It makes you seem more fallible, and more human. Maybe a video game character could stumble once in awhile. I dunno. These things happen.

Random Aside

As I'm editing this section, I'm sitting in a food court on a Tuesday afternoon, across from a video game store. I just glanced up to see a guy walking out with a new game. He took it out of the bag, looked at the back of the case, then kept walking.

I wonder what game it was? He's on his way home to pop that bad boy in. That's gonna be a fun afternoon. I complain about games quite a bit, but only because when I love them, I super love them. Video games are cool.

Bill To The Rescue

Bill introduces himself by driving his machete through a Clicker's head. Nice to see you, Bill! I punch out two other Infected, Ellie even stabbing one in the back. Congrats on your first in-game monster stabbing! It should make things a lot easier, having Bill around, and having Ellie ramping up into violence mode.

I've also got seven bullets now! Nice to see you, bullets! It's amazing that, with only the items that the game has forced into my inventory, I think I have enough firepower to take out that Bloater. I really didn't expect that to be possible, but here we are. Cool. I still can't believe I picked up a couple of things. I should have trusted in the good lord above.

Whoah! That's what the weapon swapping tutorial was for: I now have the revolver! Of course I do, how else could I have seven bullets? The other gun only holds six. Where did this new gun come from? I don't know! Magic gun! The designers must have gotten fed up with me not picking up weapons, so they were like, "Just take it, jerk. Take the fucking gun! A wizard did it! Whatever!"

There are four bullets in the old gun, seven in this new one. Shit, I feel like a walking arsenal. I did take one point of damage somewhere in that battle, though. Probably from falling to the ground. Or maybe all that wrestling with the undead has an effect after all.

During the Winter section, Ellie takes one of Joel's pistols. That must be why the game forced this second pistol on me. Otherwise, it would mess with the continuity later on.

Bill tells Joel to take out some Infected, but one of them's a Clicker. You've got a gun, Bill. I think you should take 'em out.

Random Aside II

Next to the video game store is a fancy haircutting place. A "hair studio". All the women who work there are hot. Like, real hot. Between the vicarious consumerism of watching people buy video games, and all the good looking people at the hair studio, this is a pretty distracting place to sit.

Bill

I really like Bill. He's gotta be the most casually gay character ever, in the sense that it doesn't matter in the slightest that he's gay. He just happens to be gay, and he's a really believable model of a survivor. His choice to live alone, rather than deal with the politics of post-apocalypse society, makes a lotta sense. The notes he leaves and the way he talks to himself fit well for a guy who's alone all the time.

I've never experienced that level of isolation, obviously. But I used to work in a projection booth, and I hardly saw anyone, day after day. Even that level of isolation will make you start to go nuts. One day, none of the movies were starting on time, so a manager went upstairs to investigate. They found the poor projectionist, sitting at a desk, crying her eyes out. Isolation is a tough thing.

I feel pretty bad for Bill. The fact that he drove away his partner is definitely in line with his abrasive, demanding personality. But it's sad, that he now lives alone in this giant, trap strewn fortress. Even the fact that Joel doesn't tell him about Tess's death is sad. Tess was Bill's connection to the larger community, and she was critical for his survival. I get that Joel finds it painful to talk about these things, but don't let Bill wait at a drop point and have no one show up. Joel really is a fucking dick.

Little things about Bill betray that he isn't as tough as he acts. I love how, right in the middle of a tense argument with Joel, Bill starts sharpening his knife. It's tough on the

surface, but it's also a bit of a bitch move. He needs an excuse to turn his eyes away from the confrontation. Goddamnit, Bill is a good character. How is Naughty Dog this good? It fucking boggles the mind.

I know that continually saying something is cool is not what would be traditionally categorized as "criticism". But when something is this cool, it's gotta be said. Again and again, it should be restated -- Everyone else has gotta up their game, because this is the new example of how fucking cool a video game can be.

Fallout 4

Sudden rant! In 2016, *Fallout 4* won a "Best Game" award at the BAFTAs. Get the fuck out of here. *Fallout 4* is a piece of shit. Before its release, I was considering writing about my *Fallout 4* playthrough. But after putting my time in, I've seen that there's no way I could have written a book about that shell of a game.

The more I played *Fallout 4*, the more I felt like my fingers were glued together. Hey, buddy: I'd really like to talk to you about what's going on. No? You're just gonna say one thing, and then wander away? Awesome. I sure wish some of my stats had some meaning beyond shooting things. Welp... I guess I'll just go shoot some more, until I finally get fed up and uninstall this goddamn mess. The earlier *Fallout* games were about using your particular character to puzzle your way through situations. *Fallout 4* is about not having to think at all. Just shoot, shoot, shoot.

User reviews have shown that I am not alone. *Fallout 4* has a *massive* number of users expressing their disappointment. And yet, *Fallout 4* wins awards. The video game establishment is a ridiculous and disappointing place. So it's cool that *The Last Of Us* won a lot of awards, but it's also clear that those awards really don't mean shit.

Ah, it feels good to get that off my chest... Fucking Bethesda. Way to suck, guys.

Games Media

While I'm ranting, I'd also like to mention how disappointed I am in the state of professional video game writing. Again, take *Fallout 4* -- When it was released, every gaming site was swathed in *Fallout 4* content. It bordered on absurd, how much coverage there was. Then, after the dust settled: Nothing.

To be fair, it took awhile to realize how much *Fallout 4* had changed. I'm not faulting video games media for their initial hype, or even for their positive reviews. We were all

very excited about Fallout 4, and I think we had reason to be.

But in the longer-term, I don't think Fallout 4 is a normal case of a player-base being divided -- User reviews on Steam and Metacritic are almost 50% negative. That's fucking insane. That is way, way more backlash than I ever dreamed a Fallout game would get. I was ride-or-die with Fallout. Now, I don't give a shit about it. That's a pretty drastic change in opinion.

But if you search for follow-up articles about Fallout 4, you won't find much. Where are the "Fallout 4 -- What Happened?" articles? I found a couple of tepid references to player disappointment, and that's it.

I had similar feelings about the press's handling of Bioshock: Infinite, which to me was also a massive disappointment. But Bioshock is a much more subjective situation. Fallout 4 is literally missing the role-playing and situational adaptability that is the hallmark of the series. Negative reviews on Steam are not glib or hot-headed -- They spell out, in careful detail, all the things that are wrong with that game.

If that's not a story, then what are games writers actually doing? It might be unrealistic to expect a journalistic expose, or for someone to delve deep into the design culture of Bethesda Softworks. But there could at least be articles about the Fallout backlash. There could at least be journalistic acknowledgment that Fallout 4, while a financial success, was also a huge stumble in the eyes of long-time players.

If there were enough of those articles, maybe Bethesda would respond. Maybe the journalistic arm of games media would serve some purpose. Games media has always been referred to as "the enthusiast press", but it really does seem more like a marketing arm than it does any kind of legitimate establishment. We all get hyped for games, but hype is not journalism.

It really bums me out, is what I'm trying to say. Danny O'Dwyer has a video called "The Problems With Games Media & Why I Started Noclip", as part of his fan-funded Noclip project. In it, he describes the advertising model under which games media operates, and how "we're circling the drain on that one". I agree strongly with his position.

Sorry to all the games press who I'm probably offending. Now, speaking of not making friends: Let's hang out with Bill!

The Chess Bar

Bill handcuffs Ellie to a pipe, as part of his rigorous defense-against-outsiders protocol.

Ellie pulls the pipe free, and really lets loose on Bill, verbally and physically.

At least some of Ellie's outburst has gotta be because she was having to be on her best behavior around Joel. Now, there's finally someone she can unleash on, and Bill seems like a good guy to hit. Big guy, bad attitude -- He could probably use a good smack with a pipe.

Bill and Joel are both southerners who have found themselves in Boston. That's one southerner more than I would expect to find that far north. Does that suggest that the South is big-time fucked? I do wish I knew a bit more about Bill's history. He says the favors he owes Joel aren't worth a car, and Joel authoritatively states that, yes, they are. Did Bill start out living in the Boston QZ, and strike out on his own? Or was he always on the outside? If so, how did he meet Tess? The specifics of his setup really intrigue me.

In Night Of The Living Dead, they board up a house. In Dawn Of The Dead, they board up a mall. This seems like the next step: Bill has boarded up an entire town, like a weird spider in a giant makeshift web.

Bill unlocks Ellie's handcuffs, and Joel tosses them on the floor, but Bill doesn't pick them up. That's weird. Maybe Bill doesn't mind leaving stuff lying around. I guess it ain't going anywhere.

While looking around the bar, I notice a little bit of dust fall from the ceiling. That is a ridiculously unnecessary level of detail. I love it.

It's starting to feel less weird that I'm not picking up items. I'm starting to realize how do-able this is, and it feels kinda good to leave the items behind. An upgrade manual? No thanks. A shiv? Fuck you, shiv. Remember how important the shivs seemed, the first time through? Shivs seemed like everything. Then they got less and less necessary, and now I don't need 'em at all.

What an incredibly dumb thing to be proud of. "Hey Mom, how you doing? I'm alright. Grandma's sick? Hey, great, shut up for a minute. I've been playing this video game, and I'm getting so good at it. Like, *so* good. I'm doing things no one on the Earth has done. Sure, I think about getting a job sometimes, but you know... this is my real work. No, I don't know what you can tell Aunt Clarissa I'm doing. Tell her I'm a doctor. Tell her I'm dead. I don't care."

Bill has left a very forceful note to himself, about how important it is to clear the fences. The Infected are piling up on the fences, Bill. CLEAR THE FENCES, BILL. He must have pretty serious depression some days, being out here all alone, in the midst of a

world that's totally super mega-fucked. It'd be easy to stay holed away, eating canned food and ignoring the overall state of his town. But if he doesn't clear those fences, soon there won't be fences at all, and one day an Infected will knock down his door and tear his throat out. **SO CLEAR THE FENCES, BILL.**

There's a chessboard set up in one of the booths. I wonder if this is the last game of chess that Bill and Frank played? Or maybe it's a game Bill is playing against himself. Each time he comes through this way, he could play one move, alternating sides. With enough time between moves, that could be an alright game. Probably not as fun as having another person around, but these things happen.

Since I didn't pick up that bow earlier, there's a new bow in the bar. Now I finally know what happens if you don't pick up the bow: The game adds more bows. It sounds dumb to say, but that kinda worried me -- I kept imagining some dope who missed the bow, and then had to play the whole game bowless. That's an inappropriate use of mental resources if I ever heard one.

Bill agrees to help Joel get a working car, due to the many favors he owes Joel and Tess. He says, "Best stay right on my ass." That's one of those weird southern U.S. expressions that's supposed to be tough, but just sounds weak. They've got a bunch of those.

I always wonder if that dorky-yet-tough attitude is partially deliberate, like a challenge. "Yeah, I said something really lame. What are you gonna do? You got the balls to call me on it?" Or maybe we up north just have a different idea about how a tough guy should talk.

Following Bill

Bill leads us through some abandoned buildings. If you stray from the main path, Joel will say, "I'm gonna take a look in here." Bill says, "Go ahead. Ain't anything in there that I need." I love how they took the time to normalize my video-game behavior. Of course I'm gonna check all the rooms. Even playing itemless, there are still things to find.

One is a note that Bill left for himself, about a group of Hunters getting too close to his town. Hunters, ie: human raiders, would be a serious problem for Bill. This town would be a sweet take. If they could kill this one guy, they'd get all the food and weapons he's been hoarding. According to the manifest we found earlier, Bill is trading whole cases of booze to Tess -- I bet he's got all kinds of shit squirreled away.

Ludonarrative Harmony

I like how The Last Of Us makes at least a token effort to have the game items make some kind of sense. A rag and alcohol makes a health kit, which Joel wraps on himself to ease the pain of his grazes. Even weird stuff like Listen Mode, or Joel upgrading his inborn abilities with pills, are at least on the vaguest edge of some kind of pseudo-logic. There's a back-of-the-box quote for you:

"...on the vaguest edge of some kind of pseudo-logic!" -*Gamepro*

Despite its interest in realism, The Last Of Us is still unabashedly gamey. It's about item collecting, and resource management, and reflexes, and shooting people in the face. Those old-school, gamified elements are nice, because sometimes I find myself drifting so far down the art-game hole that I can barely see sunlight.

For instance, I legitimately think Slave Of God is a great game, even though it's a barely comprehensible metaphor for being stoned at a dance club. It's all colors and craziness, and barely makes any sense at all. It might as well have been named "Fuck You, Video Games".

That The Last Of Us can wear its gaminess on its sleeve, yet still manage to tie together its gameplay, story and overall situation into such an artful package -- It's practically a miracle, man. This game really does seem like one in a million.

Rags

On the other hand, I gotta admit that when you're low on rags, The Last Of Us's gameyness can get annoying. The artificial scarcity can be brutal. It's a rag! When it's a life or death situation, I'll find some fucking rags! I'll use my own pants! It's no time for fancy Joel to hold out until he can find his very favorite, perfect kind of rag. "It has to be the same as the curtains I had as a kid, or I won't let it touch my skin." Okay, Joel. You do know that you're bleeding, right? You crazy old, rag-hating bastard.

Still With Bill

One of the houses we're walking through has a framed picture of a mime. I've got no explanation for that.

Since I've been trying to pay more attention to the little details, I've started noticing a lot more repeated assets. Finding three copies of that "starting a small business" book in

Joel's house was no accident. But it took me four playthroughs and a decision to write a whole book before I started noticing these things, so it's clearly no big deal.

Bill has a trapped Infected he hadn't dealt with, so he walks over and hacks its head off, saying, "I was meaning to take care of that." His level of comfort with the Infected is pretty crazy. I guess this is all he does all day -- Scavenge and deal with the Infected. These creatures must have taken on a level of unreality for him. They're like a game, like that chessboard back at the bar. His town is the board, and these monsters are just the pieces.

I head over to inspect the bloody corpse, and a damn butterfly flies by. Haha. That kinda sums up the visual style of this game: Brutal violence against a backdrop of nature reclaiming the planet. Gross and beautiful.

"Gross And Beautiful!" -Mean Machines

Ellie asks Bill why he doesn't fix any of the old cars that are laying around, and he explains how super fucked they are. He says the Military are the only ones making new car batteries.

It's nice to hear that the Military is still producing things -- Maybe the human race won't be fucked in the long term. I know the title The Last Of Us implies that because of Joel's actions, this is the last generation of people there are ever gonna be. But I still like to think that they might scrape by, even without the mythical serum from Ellie's brain.

Some Infected attack us in a parking lot, and kill us immediately. After a couple of deaths, I notice that if I creep ahead, the Infected are all right there, waiting. I like that they don't just spawn out of nowhere, or suddenly clamber over a fence. They were there all along, the characters just didn't notice them as they were chatting away.

Watching the Infected standing still, while Bill and Ellie keep talking, is so creepy. The two female runners are wearing the same clothes, and it feels a little video gamey. They seem like two enemy assets, placed at this point on the map.

But when they start running toward me, it feels frightening. I don't know why. If they get me, I can just start again. There's no real danger here. But it feels like there is. This is another reason I like playing games on Hard -- I love this feeling. If my primal instincts aren't going off in some capacity, games get boring real fast.

There are two Clickers in this group. I'm hoping Bill can take care of them. Again, it reminds me of that chess game on Bill's table. Don't go near the Clickers. Don't go near two or more Runners at once. Try to maneuver all the pieces until you can capture them,

one at a time.

There are times when the combat animations really go to hell. Trying to fight on stairs is always a disaster. But it's amazing how often it works, and everything looks great. I break combat to run away, but I'm not fast enough, and get grabbed from behind. I decide to restart the encounter, but just before I pause the game Bill comes up, swinging his machete to help me. That moment gets frozen in time, and it really looks like a couple of people trying to fight off a crazed monster. It must be moments like this that inspired the inclusion of Photo Mode in the PS4 version.

Violence

I guess I'd say I'm pretty desensitized to violence. When our family got our first internet connection, it didn't take long for my brother and I to start looking up crime scene photos. Our connection was slow, so the images would tick down very gradually; we'd watch "Suicide Victim - Shotgun" with our brows furrowed, until the grisly image slowly became decipherable. Even my Mom joined us for a bit. I remember a photo where a guy had somehow gotten his head run over in a parking lot, and we all agreed that it looked like a broken watermelon. Gross, but fascinating. It was a nice family moment.

So maybe it's not surprising that the violence in most games doesn't bother me. But even though it doesn't bother me, I'm not always on board with video game violence. Sometimes it's silly, like the violence in Bioshock: Infinite, which seemed extremely incongruous. It felt like gore was included to fulfill some half-formed notion of what's expected in a video game. It was mostly blood for blood's sake.

On the creepy and awful side, some of the violence against women in games really unnerves me. In God Of War 3, Kratos crushes a crying woman to death, just so he can prop open a giant door for a few moments. In Saint's Row 2, your character throws a friendly bartender into a hail of gunfire, for no particular reason, and the game just trucks along like nothing happened.

In exploitation films, at least the violence is framed in the context of a wrong that needs to be righted. In those two examples, the developers seemed to want me to think, "This is cool. I'm playing a cool game." Scenes like that really make me feel ashamed of video games.

Now that I've gotten all judgmental about these bad people, who should in fact feel bad about themselves and the reprehensible scenes they've helped create, let's talk about when violence seems appropriate. As an example, let's use... I don't know, let's say...

You know what, I guess we'll go with The Last Of Us.

In The Last Of Us, the violence is crazy. It's dirty, and messy, and ugly. But, I'd argue that it's not glorified. Well, it is a bit. But not to the extent that it is in other games. The Last Of Us violence is not fun violence. It's cringe violence. You wince, you feel taken aback. Incredibly, the game might feel more exploitative if it were *less* violent.

That's a tough argument to make: That a violent game is a commentary on the horrific nature of violence, rather than a fun glorification of same. But The Last Of Us comes much closer to accomplishing that balance than most other games. Softening its violence might trivialize the situation. It could undermine the brutality of what these characters are doing to each other. The Last Of Us never lets the player forget that the violence in this world is an awful thing. It's a terrible price these people are paying in order to survive. It's not a fun thing that they're doing for our enjoyment.

Of course, the more I play, the less I feel that way. I'm getting desensitized. But the fact that I wasn't desensitized from the first moment is an accomplishment. And I still sometimes have those wincing moments. Sometimes, the reality of who Joel is and of what he's doing is impossible to ignore.

In other games, I would dismiss the character's actions as a function of the gameplay: He's not *really* doing these things. This is just the gameplay part. He has to kill all these people, or there would be no game. Whereas in The Last Of Us, it feels like Joel *is* doing these things. The violence is acknowledged, and the storyline sees it through. It seems like the violence in The Last Of Us is earned, rather than being exploitative.

Mostly. I mean, I still feel good when I get a headshot on some asshole who's been fucking with me. It is a video game, after all, and not some mega magic super miracle.

"...Not Some Mega Magic Super Miracle! [Just] A Video Game! 10 Out Of 10!"
-Captron Magic

Infected Ambush

Back to the parking lot battle with the Infected. The fluidity of watching Joel run, then clamber up onto an old van looks amazing. The Uncharted games were wonderful for this, also. The combat is so fluid -- You don't sit still and play whack-a-mole from behind cover. You *move*.

I decide to start letting the fights play out, rather than restarting as soon as I take damage. I want to see the interplay between me, Bill and Ellie. It really is great to watch;

there are a ton of surprising, very real-seeming moments between us.

At one point I get surrounded by Infected and started cowering. I forgot about that mechanic, since it doesn't happen very often. Bill whacks a Runner with his machete, and I finish her off with my fists of steel. It's almost weird how fluid that seems, like real teamwork.

How did Naughty Dog manage this? Who are the critics who say the combat mechanics in this game are lacking? What the heck other games are they playing? Admittedly, when something doesn't work, I just ignore it. But in most games, nothing works, ever. Nothing really feels like a down-and-dirty, you-and-me, neck and neck struggle. Fights in other games don't feel dirty and messy. They just feel like video game fights.

Maybe that's what some people didn't like -- There's definitely a type of gamer who doesn't want to struggle, and who only wants games to be power fantasies. But this game, especially the first time through, definitely makes you struggle. There are a lot of trading blows, and not a lot of clean victories.

There's one death takedown, where an Infected is on your chest, and just starts crazily beating on your corpse -- Man, that one always freaks me out.

This fight is really hard. It's starting to exhaust me a bit. Maybe I should allow myself to take some damage, and stop trying to do every fight perfectly. But this demoralized feeling does mirror my first playthrough. The first time, I wasn't trying to be perfect. I was just trying to get through each battle by any means necessary. So upping the ante puts me back in a similar mindset.

That first playthrough was a bit too stressful to really be fun, and some reviews of the game were mixed for that reason. But, being a fan of story & gameplay marriages as I am, I really appreciated it. The game's relentless combat sometimes made me feel horrible, but as I've said, that sense of exhaustion within a situation is a feeling only a video game can convey.

Maybe I won't be able to finish this fight today. I might have to sleep on it. It really feels rough, it feels like a goddamn slog. But that's what Joel's life is. Using games to simulate a lack of power, rather than the reverse -- That's a cool fucking thing.

Ellie takes down a Clicker with a brick, and he didn't seem to be getting back up, though I died too quickly to be sure. What the fuck was that? Did Ellie just kill a Clicker with a brick?

I keep at it, and it only takes a few more tries before I finally make it. Whew. If Ellie

stuns a Clicker with a brick, I wonder if I could then get some punches in? I was too scared to try it, so I had to wait for Bill to finally take out the last Clicker himself. Sorry I wasn't more help there, Bill.

Joel's arms are really strong, by the way. I was rushing to rescue Bill, stopped to beat the shit out of a Runner on the way, and without breaking stride or swing, moved right on to Bill's attacker. It was like swinging your arms in a windmill and just running into a fight.

Post-Battle Talk

During our post-fight banter, Bill says the Infected are predictable, and it's the normal people that scare him. He then mentions that Joel, of all people, should know about that. Ellie asks, what does that mean?

IT MEANS JOEL WAS A NO GOOD MURDERING HUNTER! HE'S A MURDERER! A MURDERER!!! It is kinda funny that Joel's past is such a distinct plot point, when in other games I've murdered hundreds without anyone making a particular point of it.

I know this is taking things a little far, but in some ways, this game closes the book on video games. If you don't want ludo-narrative dissonance between your gameplay and your story, then you have to tell the story of a murderer. There's really no other choice when your game is about murder.

Man, this book is getting pretty long, huh? And we've barely made it out of Boston. Maybe this book itself will become a metaphor for Joel's story -- A seemingly endless trudge through the dregs of humanity, with nothing but a troubling finale as a reward. Thanks for reading this, by the way. I think more books should say "thank you", right in the middle. So reader, whoever you may be: You're cool by me.

Alright! Coolness confirmed, let's carry on.

Bill's Hideout

At Bill's hideout, Joel asks if a simple locked gate is enough defense. Bill says, They don't have a key. I guess he's right. A gate would probably be enough to stop the Infected.

Of course, if a group of humans were to get this far, no gate is gonna stop them. Given that, I reckon there's no sense trying to defend against the impossible. At that point,

trying to escape would probably be Bill's only option.

Humankind Is Dangerous

Even in such a pathetic state, at the very end of their existence, human beings are still the most dangerous creatures on the planet. One thing that makes the Last Of Us apocalypse so compelling to me is that humans were the only animals affected. It's not a nuclear apocalypse that destroyed everything, like Fallout. It's not a mysterious and brutal metaphor-affliction, like The Road. This apocalypse actually benefited the other creatures on the planet, by getting us and our destructive behavior out of the picture.

I'm a fan of the human race. Even if we destroyed everything on Earth, and were left clinging to a ruined rock, I'd say it was worth it, just for something as interesting as us to have existed. But to an outside observer, we probably look like some world-devouring bacteria. Aliens would probably view us piteously, as a bizarre cruelty of evolution: A bacteria whose each individual unit knows that it's gonna die. What a weird thing.

But as a human being myself, I think we're pretty great. I kinda can't help it, and that species-specific zealotry makes me understand why, if the Earth had a will, it would surely be trying to shake us off. If there were really such a thing as balance in nature, we have clearly upset it.

So as villains go, this is a great apocalypse. This is an apocalypse we can really take personally. This apocalypse says that humankind has gotta go, but everyone else can stay. And we say, Dude! Dude. Fuck that.

If only we could stop killing each other. But hey, nobody said bacteria was smart.

Arming For Adventure

Bill takes us into one of his hideouts, which used to be a church. Wait, did he just give me a shotgun? Man, all this time I was so worried about how I was gonna deal with that Bloater in the school gym. But this game just keeps forcing guns on me. Eleven bullets, six shotgun shells and a molotov. Bloater, you are fucking dead.

Bill shows me a nailbomb, and the game won't let me leave Bill's basement until I pick it up. Christ, I'm getting spoiled.

The nail bombs definitely make no sense. They'd need some kind of electronics to explode due to enemy proximity, and some super electronics to know not to explode

when it's Joel who's nearby. I also don't think I'd keep one of those in my backpack, even with their supernatural AI. It's along the lines of the homemade flamethrower: There's survivalism, and there's being a IED carrying maniac.

There's another bow upstairs. This must be baffling for a game designer. "Alright, I can see how a player might miss that first bow. And the second one, I dunno... maybe their phone rang right as they got to it. But the third one is right there! Pick it up! Pick up the fucking bow, you moron!" But instead, I walk right by.

This is the first time I didn't steal the pills from Bill's room. So this version of Joel is, arguably, a mildly better person. Very mildly.

Is that gay porn that's laying on top of Bill's tv? Survey says: Yes.

The Super Apocalypse: Confirmed Insane

I've been writing this book in a bit of a vacuum; I mainly discuss it with my friends, and they're used to seeing me take on bizarre gaming handicaps. Wanna get better with the whip in Spelunky? Just refuse to pick up the shotgun. Wanna learn how to whip arrows out of the air? Make a rule that you have to air-whip every arrow trap you find. Set higher and higher bars, and you'll rise up to meet them. If only I were so brave in real life.

But since my gaming habits have become a constant process of self-flagellation, it was hard to tell if the Super Apocalypse playthrough was even that cool of a thing. Maybe I'm kidding myself about how bizarre or difficult this is.

But I met some new people during a brainstorming meeting for a Toronto-based video game documentary; we were all at a bar, talking about what other projects we were working on. I told them about this book, and how I played through The Last Of Us without picking up any items.

One of the guys turned toward me and said, "You did *what*!?"

That made me laugh, and confirmed that the Super Apocalypse playthrough is indeed absurd. Every playthrough seems easy once it's been done, so I was glad to have the ridiculousness of this project confirmed. Dumbest guy to ever play The Last Of Us: Possibly me. I'm at least in the running.

On my deathbed, I can tell the nurses about what I accomplished in life. "Back in the day, I played this one video game so incorrectly... it was the wrongest anyone had ever

played it."

"Is that why you have no grandchildren to be at your bedside, Mr. McNally?"

"Yes it is. Yes... it... eugh..."

Hmm. That doesn't make me feel very good.

The Cemetery

We leave the hideout, creeping into a cemetery full of Clickers. I read on the wiki that the Clickers all appear to be female, and judging by these, that might be true. But I still can't take a close look at all of them without getting my face eaten off.

Tech Storytelling

It's interesting how choices made for technological reasons can have story implications. If all of the Clickers are female, what does that mean about the infection? When asked why there were no infected children, Neil Druckmann said there was no time to implement them, insinuating that there should be. But there aren't, so in the final reality presented by The Last Of Us, it could be inferred that children can't survive being infected.

I think having to work within technological guidelines is part of what makes storytelling in video games so interesting. It's often said that having limits can improve art, and there are no limits harder than tech limits. Limits in a book are largely self-imposed. Since the rise of computer graphics, movies have almost no limits, and that lack of constraint has not necessarily made movies better.

But what medium besides video games could make something like Pac-Man? Pac-Man was not a work of minimalism. It wasn't ironic, it wasn't a reference, it wasn't a throw-back. Pac-Man was straining to be as great as it could be, given the technological restraints of the time. It ended up being weird as shit, and that weirdness took over the world.

In a less limited environment, there's no way a work like that could be created. I can't think of another medium that unabashedly *strives* the way video games do. We would do more than this if we could, but we can't, and what we make is somehow greater for it.

The constraints on The Last Of Us are very different, but they still have a great effect on

the final product. I can only imagine the number of changes and compromises that had to be made during development. The struggle to keep the gameplay and storyline integrated despite those changes must have been brutal. But somehow, it all worked out.

This theory gets a little shakier when applied to games that use a deliberately old-school style, but I think it's still mostly applicable. A lot of the throwback style arose from mobile phone games, or flash, both of which have their own constraints. I read that if *Broken Age* had been made in the old SCUMM system, modern computers wouldn't be able to run it.

Everyone has to deal with tech, no matter what they're making, and at what level. Gaming is always linked to technological progress, and I think that helps make it such a vital art form. Even when it sucks.

Cemetery Death Party

Now, back to survival concerns: There's no good way to get through this cemetery. It's filled with four or five Clickers, in a very small space. Bill just gave me a fully loaded shotgun, so it's not unreasonable to expect me to blow their heads off. But I shan't.

I try sneaking, but halfway through they always seem to notice me. So instead, I run. After a couple of tries, I manage to run all the way to the end of the section, but there's no icon to manipulate the door. It must be because the Clickers are all freaking out. I'm meant to take care of them. So I stand there, waiting to die.

But I don't die. The Clickers don't seem able to move into the little alcove where the door is. Could Bill kill all of these Clickers? It seems unlikely, especially since he's just standing there like an idiot.

But after a few moments, the Clickers calm down, and wander away. Then the door icon pops up. I've somehow done it again: I fudged through another section with no bullets, taking no damage. It's fucking crazy that this keeps working out.

Soon after, an Infected grabs me, and Ellie pulls it off before I take any damage. Nice one, Ellie! But then another one kills me, and we go all the way back to the start of the cemetery. What the shit.

The weird glitch with the cemetery door doesn't work a second time. Instead, I hide on some dead-end stairs, across from the exit door, and wait. Miraculously, the Clickers don't find me. They wander off, we head through the door, and this time the game checkpoints us on the other side. Phew.

The Suburbs

We start crawling through the suburbs, weaving through people's backyards. It feels fucking creepy. Bill comes running around a corner and my heart jumps into my throat. Jesus, Bill. Be fucking cool.

I get jumped and killed, and when the game reloads the two Infected at the start of the suburbs stay dead. That's weird, but I'll take it.

I notice that the little wrench icon has appeared at some point, which means I can craft something. Turns out when I picked up that nail bomb, I also got the materials to make a second nail bomb. The Last Of Us has really got my back, this game is drowning me in items. I've got like four things now.

Bill's footsteps really are ridiculously loud. Giving companions such audible footfalls was a strange choice.

Say... This house looks an awful lot like Clementine's house from The Walking Dead. That can't be an accident, right? Zombie game brotherhood!

The "press select to craft" message comes up again. For god's sake. I'm hours deep on Survivor difficulty. I even crafted something earlier, just so you'd shut up about crafting. I fucking know how to craft! You're not my Mom, Last Of Us! YOU'RE NOT MY MOM AND I KNOW YOU BLEW UNCLE REG! HE FUCKING TOLD ME! I DIDN'T WANNA HEAR ABOUT THAT! I WAS JUST TRYING TO GET A RIDE DOWNTOWN! Oh, god... our family... what happened..? So anyway, I craft another nail bomb.

Remember how the original Bioshock had an "adaptive training system", to help teach players about the game? Yet ten hours in, it was still telling me which button would make me duck. I guess I didn't duck often enough to cause it to adapt. I felt like I did, but whatever. You're not my Dad, adaptive training system.

The fight outside the school is pretty rough; two big waves of Infected attack, with no checkpoint. I'm tempted to relax and just let them dish out a little damage. But if I take a little damage here, and a little damage during the next fight, then next thing you know I'm fucking dead. DEAD LIKE UNCLE REG IF I EVER SEE HIM AGAIN. Besides, I saw those guys on YouTube do No Damage runs -- They were walking arsenals of death, but if they can do it, surely I can do it as well, with only my fists.

As usual, the best strategy turns out to be running. I run all around, like a crazy runnin' fool, until I catch a stray Infected who doesn't have any of his friends around. Then I

punch that guy good. Rinse and repeat. I rinse and repeat many times. I cane and rinse, if you will.

School Buses

There are a ton of school buses in this parking lot. They have banners on them that read, "Group 1 - Springfield", "Group 3 - Hartford" and "Group 4 - Boston".

I guess all these groups came here for a basketball tournament or something. They must have been away from home when the outbreak hit. That's a shame. And that's why you should never play sports.

I never thought to question why there are so many school buses in this area -- From a level-design standpoint, it's clearly so that a bunch of Runners can appear out of nowhere. But it's cool that when someone decides to look for an answer, they can find it.

I'm curious which city Group 2 was from, but I can't find any of their buses. What I do find, however, is a discarded giraffe toy! WHOAH!!! Spoiler alert!!

After clearing out the Infected, Joel boosts Ellie up onto one of the buses, in what I think is the first "Joel boosting up Ellie" scene. Then more Infected arrive, and we get chased into the school. Turns out the battery we came here to get is missing, and everyone freaks out a little. Then we're chased deeper into the school, barricading the door behind us.

The School

Ah, the school. God dammit. This is one of the sections that would flit most often through my mind, when I was thinking about trying this run. I really don't know how I'm gonna do this.

This first hallway was where I first realized the game has a dynamic supply system. If I had low health, Ellie would always give me a health pack here. Apparently she just finds it laying around, or maybe had it tucked away for a rainy day.

Regenerating Health

When the mechanic of regenerating health first started gaining popularity, I was a fan. When any video game resource is finite, I compulsively hoard it. But if there's just a

cooldown period before an ability recharges, then I'll use it. Games are more fun when you use your abilities, rather than saving them up for a big fight that may never come.

Regenerating health made me realize that a character's health bar is a similar resource. When you rely on health pickups, you have to be careful all the time. Taking a chance now might cause you to wedge yourself into a more dire situation later.

With regenerating health, you're free to try bolder strategies. As long as you scrape through that specific encounter with a sliver of life, there's no long-term penalty for trying something crazy.

I love being free to do crazy shit in games. I don't like being hemmed behind cover, carefully firing at enemies. That's totally mind-numbing to me. I wanna run around, trying to get the drop on enemies, and having to deal with the moment-to-moment repercussions of my ill-advised maneuvers. Traditional health bars don't support that style of playing. You'll just get gradually ground down until you have no choice but to stay behind cover, carefully firing at enemies.

However, I heard someone mention that the downside to regenerating health is that it reduces the scope of encounters. Regenerating health boils a game down into a series of twenty second encounters. On the other hand, the scarcity of health packs can create greater tension, stretching the stress of an encounter out over three or four minutes. I think it was Jonathan Blow who said that, actually. It's a good point, and one I hadn't considered.

The Last Of Us does a pretty nice job of incorporating both styles. On the surface, the game has a traditional health bar, with restorative items. The reason I never crafted a molotov during my earlier playthroughs was because I was so terrified of running out of health. There seemed to be no safety net down there, and on my first playthrough, The Last Of Us seemed like one brutal grind of getting my ass kicked.

But on later playthroughs, I've realized how much the game is actually looking after me. Characters will coyly give me all kinds of stuff, but without it being too obvious. Ultimately, The Last Of Us has all the hallmarks of a modern game, in the sense that it doesn't want a player to get too stuck, or get too lost. As long as you put in the time, The Last Of Us wants you to see its ending.

But the game has still found a way to give the player that old-school health bar scare. It gives the player resource management stress, which is one of the things that made old games so exciting. But if that stress reaches a breaking point, one of the under-the-hood systems will find a way to help you. It took awhile for me to recognize that balance, but I became really impressed with how The Last Of Us slyly uses both methods of health

management.

Approaching The Gym

You know that animation where Joel and Ellie hide together, and Joel's arm covers Ellie protectively? That can also happen with Joel and Bill. Don't worry, Bill. I got you, man.

This run up to the Bloater is goddamn insane. To do it two-fisted involves a lot of letting Bill kill people, and takes a lot of luck. I have to try over and over, a sickening amount of times, before I eventually manage to get through with only a little damage taken. I know I could do it damage-free, but this overall playthrough has gone about 1000% better than I expected it to. I thought I'd be on the ragged edge all the time, just praying that my partner would give me one of those out-of-the-blue health packs. So I'm willing to fight the Bloater with a little damage. Fuck it.

That section really was totally inappropriate to try to tackle with only fists. I'm just gonna count my blessings that it's over. It took so long that I was really starting to question this whole endeavor. It was like trying to make a sandwich with your elbows, even though you have hands -- Instead of feeling accomplished by achieving a weird thing, the total pointlessness of this playthrough really began to loom large.

But now I'm gonna blow up that Bloater good. I had a brief crisis of faith, but this is gonna rejuvenate me. Time to finally pull out this arsenal that's been burning a hole in my backpack.

The Gym

After the gauntlet of the school corridors, we barricade ourselves in the school gym. But we've locked ourselves in with the largest of all the Infected -- The Bloater! Fuck!

It's actually a bit of a dorky moment when the Bloater first kicks open the equipment room door. Bill should yell, "Boss fight!" It's a lot more telegraphed than any of the earlier battles.

If Clickers are female, then I guess Bloaters must be, too. She looks so tough, so self assured... just spoiling for a battle. It might make sense for her to be a bit more lurchy and disoriented; judging by the spore-filled room she came out of, she's never been outside of the equipment closet before. The sweet sound of human voices must have called her to action.

I take some fairly direct hits from spore bombs, and they don't seem to do any damage on impact. It's only the residual cloud that hurts. For the sake of science, I try to carefully punch the Bloater.

Nope. Dangit, I was using that head!

Well, I had to try it. I was hoping that I could maybe pop her in the back of the head, just once real quick, and dash away. But my jaw got torn off. A message pops up that says, "Punching a Clicker is ineffective, try a melee weapon." Can you smack a Bloater with a 2x4? I don't know how I'd get all the way here with a melee weapon, but I assume that wouldn't work either.

My worries about how I would manage to kill this Bloater were unnecessary, 'cause it goes down real easy. A molotov sets it on fire, and while it's weakened, a nail bomb takes it down. Boom! Fuck you, Bloater! Maybe Bill coulda slowly shot the thing to death, but I think a Bloater deserves the honor of being blown up while on fire.

Taking out the remaining stragglers is pretty weird. I run circles around the gym, at a pace a little too fast for a normal person, with no sign of slowing or getting tired. It's like a fucked up racing game, where I occasionally slug a zombie in the face as I race by. But hey, if it works, it works.

Frank's House

We clamber out of the gym and head into a nearby house, where we find Bill's old partner Frank. Or, we find Frank's corpse, hanging in the living room. We also discover that the car battery was missing because Frank had grabbed it. Getting the battery back to his house by himself is pretty impressive. Granted, he took a couple bites while doing it.

Facial Expressions

During one of my later, more casual playthroughs, I happened to have the sound turned down during this section. I focused more on the character's facial expressions, and man, the Naughty Dog animators really nailed that stuff.

Joel and Bill are arguing, then Bill sees Frank. Bill's eyes show a lot of hurt, but Joel is still pissed. Then Joel softens, gesturing toward Frank as he says, "I reckon he didn't wanna turn..." It's just... so good. So goddamn good.

Frank's Note

Frank left a note which basically says that dying alone is better than trying to live with Bill. It's weird that for full trophy completion, you have to give Frank's mean note to Bill, so that you can pick it up again in a crumpled state. It's far kinder not to let him know how much Frank hated him. And I got nothing against Bill, so I keep the note to myself.

When Bill describes Frank as "someone he had to look after", it's partially because Bill is a jerk, and partially an accurate description. Bill is the survivalist, where Frank is clearly not. Frank is a smaller guy who wears Hawaiian shirts -- He definitely wasn't shoring up the perimeter and maintaining traps. This house of his doesn't even have boarded up windows. I'm not really sure how he intended to survive on his own. I guess he was considering driving away, but what then? I think it must have been this Frank who was trying to get into the Boston QZ. He'd be under military rule, but at least there would be a pretense that someone was looking after him.

Faces

I really like the look of the faces in this game, particularly the older characters like Joel and Bill. They're a mix of realistic and stylized which kind of ends up looking like an oil painting. The characters' eyes also look much better in The Last Of Us than they did in Uncharted 2, or even Uncharted 3. Bill's eyes are a bit bloodshot, and a bit watery. When I was a kid, I never dreamed I'd be able to learn about a video game character by the small details of his eyes. It's crazy.

Preparing To Leave

According to Bill, the Military convoy crashed a few months ago. So Frank had to be alive at that point. His corpse looks like he must have died very soon after. Perhaps if you die before the cordyceps can take hold, it has a mummifying effect on your body.

There's a lot of stuff in this house. Eight shotgun shells, a reinforced bat, pills, various tiny gears. And this is on the ultra-scant Survivor mode. Normal mode must be a fucking cornucopia. Normal mode really shouldn't even exist. Hard mode should be Normal, and Normal should be Easy. Easy should be Get The Fuck Out Of Here, Video Games Don't Have To Be For Everyone. The gameplay in The Last Of Us has strong narrative implications; I must re-iterate, AGAIN, that the mechanical challenge of the game is very important to the story being told.

"Hey Joel, there are a bunch of shotgun shells here by the door. And a spiked bat in the kitchen. You might wanna grab those."

"No, Bill. I'm alright."

"You sure? Well, then I'm gonna take 'em."

"No, Bill, you won't. No one's taking anything. It's the Super Apocalypse. Those items ain't even there."

"What? Man, you're a goddamn crazy fuck. I sure can't wait until you get the fuck out of my life."

"I respect that opinion, and additionally Bill, let's kiss."

That was some spontaneous fan fiction.

Ellie takes the wheel of Frank's truck, and we never find out where she learned to drive. Driving is probably similar to riding a horse. Joel tells Ellie she's doing a good job, before he and Bill start pushing.

The wheels in Joel's head are turning. Tess is dead, and she ain't coming back. Joel has had some experience with moving on, and that's what's happening: They're taking this truck, driving it far away from Boston, and whatever happened there doesn't matter anymore.

Pushing Frank's Truck

When Joel gets into position to give the truck a push, his watch clips into his wrist. Looks painful.

Joel and Bill are trying to push the truck when HOLY SHIT INFECTED ATTACK! I let Bill kill the Clickers, and realize that I still haven't used any of my bullets. I thought I'd need them all for that Bloater, but now the Bloater's dead. I don't know what I'll need them for. Maybe nothing. The second Bloater is the obvious problem, but that's during Ellie's section, and Joel's items don't carry over. I might be able to carry these eleven bullets and six shells all the way to the end of the game. If I wanted to be extra hardcore, I could fire them into the air right now. But I better hang on to them, just in case there's some situation I'm not thinking of.

I take a graze while defending the truck, but I assume my health bar will refill once I get

to Pittsburgh. So I let it slide. We're cool, zombie. Just lemme... kill you real quick...

The Last Of Us does become a much more basic game when you don't use weapons. There are huge amounts of punching and choking. It's a good way to bear down on the game, and focus on it in a new way. But I do miss shooting motherfuckers.

We escape the Infected, get the truck started, and Joel tells Ellie to keep the engine running. She gives him a trucker-worthy thumbs up. Ellie's a pretty cool cat.

Joel apologizes to Bill about Frank, but still doesn't tell him that Tess is dead. I still think that's pretty fucked up. It's not the most fucked up thing Joel's ever done, or will do in the future. But when Bill's waiting for Tess to show up, and she never does, that'll be the final cherry-on-top of Bill's dealings with Nutcase Fucking Joel.

It really is amazing how much leeway we give Joel, just because he's the main character. If you look at this game from anyone else's perspective, dealing with Psycho Joel must be a goddamn nightmare. Or at the very least, a pain in the ass.

"Hey, you wanna invite Joel to board game night?"

"Which Joel? Psycho Joel? No. No I fucking don't. That dude's fucking psycho. That's why they call him Psycho Joel. They don't call him Board Game Joel."

"Alright, christ. I was just asking. Calm the fuck down."

That's another piece of short fanfiction I wrote, entitled "Board Game Night". I sure hope nobody steals that. I knew I shouldn't have put my writing on the internet. Oh, woe. Woe and bother.

Leaving Massachusetts

Joel says his goodbyes to Bill, and Bill says he doesn't give a fuck, but gives Joel a rubber hose to siphon gas with. Then we hit the road. Road trip!

Comics And Collectibles

Ellie swiped some periodicals from Bill's basement, and we're introduced to her love of comic books. If you collect all the Savage Starlight books and read their summaries, they do sound pretty exciting.

I'm not a big fan of collectibles in games. These comics, for instance, cause fairly frequent tonal problems. Even if Ellie is angry or distracted, she pops right back to her upbeat voice when her "Cool, a comic book!" dialogue kicks in.

Collectibles definitely seem like a holdover from gaming's past. I don't mind the notes and lore items, but the pure collectibles, like the Firefly dog tags, I couldn't give a shit about. At least when Drake was picking up treasures, they were treasures. Picking up treasures is part of his job description. I'm clearly a pretty big fan of The Last Of Us, but I can't imagine going back to collect all the dog tags.

What are the lore implications of the Firefly dog tags? When a Firefly dies, does their friend throw their dog tag as hard as possible in a random direction? Oh shit, that one got stuck in a tree. Well, maybe a weird smuggler will get it down with a rock someday. Until then, rest in peace, brave Firefly.

Head Out On The Highway

Ellie gets to the end of the comic, and mentions that she hates cliffhangers. I like that the term "cliffhanger" has survived into the apocalypse. When was the last time a character was left literally hanging from a cliff? Sylvester Stalone's 1993 film *Cliffhanger*?

Before tossing Bill's porn mag out the window, Ellie says "Hold your horses". I wonder who taught her these antiquated sayings? I like them.

I realized, after moving away from the Canadian east coast, that I had picked up a lot of antiquated phrases from my Mom. Calling notebooks "scribblers", and snow pants "leggins", shit like that. Keep it alive, Ellie! The old times were the good times! Not really, but it's a nice thing to say.

I also like that even in the apocalypse, there's abandoned porn on the highway. It's a human tradition. As long as there is porn and there are highways, we will litter them with such, until we are down to our last.

Part of Ellie's thievery-haul is a cassette tape. Joel puts it on, and she discovers that it's country music. "Well... better than nothing," she says.

I could over-analyze every line of this game, but let's do just this one: Ellie says "better than nothing" dismissively, but not *too* dismissively. She wants to make it clear that country music is not her thing, but also that she doesn't really mind. And she's also staying polite enough not to offend Joel. Damn, Ashley Johnson did a good job voicing Ellie. That's just good stuff.

Party Break!

Man, can you believe this pretentious shit? Jesus christ. I'm at a bar taking a shit, and I pulled out my phone to write this update. "Oh, look at me. I'm so smart. I can ramble on and on about the dialogue from a video game." Fucking shit. How much more nonsense am I gonna cram into this book?

Alright, I'm hogging the stall. I'll get back to writing tomorrow.

Damn though, what a magical world -- You can write a book while drunk on the toilet, through the medium of your phone. Crazy.

End Of Party Break!

This drive into Pittsburgh is one of my favorite scenes. The game jump cuts from Ellie awake, to Ellie sleeping in the rain, then to the next day. As they enter the city you can see reflections on the window, while Ellie looks up at the old brownstones. It's nice, and kind of comforting. Like a family trip.

However, the actual reason for going into Pittsburgh is pretty contrived. A Hunter walks into the road -- A "Hunter", by the way, is The Last Of Us' catch-all term for a violent raider. Seeing this guy, Joel knows something bad is about to happen. Like, way totally. Fully totally. Why he didn't back up, I have no idea.

Maybe the next closest off-ramp was eight hundred miles back. Maybe he wanted to

beat rush-hour traffic? Who can say. Joel's a pretty taciturn man. He makes decisions, and he sticks by them, no matter how many hours of fighting through crazed scavenging murderers those decisions might cause. Don't ask him to explain. DON'T.

"Hey Joel, why'd we drive into that ambush?"

"Ellie, you are treadin' on some mighty thin ice."

"You can't just say that every day, about every decision that you make."

"The ice is getting thinner, girly. So thin. Razor thin. Don't break the ice, Ellie."

"Why not? What happens?"

"No one knows. 'Cause no one breaks it. No one dares."

And I assume the conversation would go on as such.

Pittsburgh Ambush

So a guy limps into the street, and Joel knows it's an ambush. With a rebel yell, Joel cries "yes please ambush me" and puts the pedal to the metal.

In a somewhat unlikely spot, the ambushers push a bus down a hill, which smashes into Joel's truck. Joel crashes, and this begins a clusterfuck which will not be resolved for an entire season.

A buncha grizzled dickbags set upon our heroes. I love the look on that one crazy old bastard's face as he holds Joel's neck over some broken glass. It always sticks in my mind; that is one crazy looking fuck.

Speaking of crazy fucks, you have to kill so many goddamn guys during this fight. Even moreso than missing having guns, I really miss having bricks. Sometimes Ellie throws a brick at someone, so I can still get an occasional brick-punch combo. She's a crack fucking shot with those bricks, the same as Joel. It's weird how Joel throws a dart later on, and totally sucks at it. If it were a brick, he'd hit the bullseye every time.

I can tell this fight is gonna be a long one, but I did get my full health bar back. So that's nice.

Ice Climber

Holy lord, what was I thinking? "I'll write a book about a video game," I said. "It'll be much more fun than trying to write a regular book." I'll tell you what I've learned so far: Writing a book is writing a book. It doesn't matter what it's about, it's still a damn book. I've been working on this for ages, and I'm only at Pittsburgh. The Last Of Us has been re-released for PlayStation 4, there's a new "Grounded" difficulty I haven't tried, and I'm still writing. It's mental. Why do people write whole books about video games? Who started this trend? It's crazy. If this isn't a sign of a pre-societal-collapse-collective-madness, then I don't know what the hell is.

"Hey, there's no more gas, and people are eating each others' faces for nourishment. What skills can you bring to our ramshackle tribe?"

"I wrote a whole book about Ice Climber."

"You don't say? Well listen, friend. Don't take this too hard, but we're gonna EAT YOUR GODDAMN FACE. YOU'RE A WORTHLESS PIECE OF TRASH PERSON. How long was your book?"

"Twelve hundred pages."

"Twelve hundred!? About Ice Climber?"

"Well, I had to describe all the enemies and different kinds of blocks. It also had a lot of pointless divergences, and-"

At this point, our protagonist's speech would become muffled, because of his face being eaten off.

Stealth Drums

One really cool aspect of The Last Of Us' stealth system are the warning drums. I didn't notice them on my first playthrough, being all caught up in the listening system as I was. Looking back, it's amazing how integral the listening system used to seem. The more I play listen-free, the more I'm able to deduce the actual rules of stealth.

Stealth in The Last Of Us doesn't quite conform to reality, as no video game does; enemies have no peripheral vision, nor can they hear their friend gurgling desperately for breath directly behind them. If you're hidden behind an open-backed shelf with nothing on it, no problem. The enemies are very polite, and like playing hide-and-seek

with a toddler, they won't admit that they've seen you.

So you've gotta internalize these game-rules, and without the visual cues given by Listen-Mode, it can be easy to stumble into a dangerous bludgeoning. But as long as you're at least trying to be sneaky, *The Last Of Us* will usually meet you halfway.

One of my favorite aspects of the stealth system is that you'll get an audio warning before everything goes to shit. It comes in the form of some gentle timpani drums... They start as a quiet rumble, letting you know that you're straying toward someone's line of sight. Then the volume grows until bam! Some post-apocalypse dickhead is shooting you in the taint!

There are times when it seems like an enemy should definitely be able to see you, but the drums haven't had a chance to hit their climax yet. You still have a moment to move out of their line of sight, and it's nice of the game to fudge things a bit. If you're running around like a post-apocalyptic crazy man, you'll of course get spotted right away. But if you make the effort to creep around, *The Last Of Us* will respect the drums. It's a really neat system that I think a lot of people missed.

The peculiar blindness of the enemies is somewhat explained, by having them look from side to side as part of their animation cycle. So while the game is gifting you with these additional moments of unrealistic stealth, there's a chance the enemy will actually be looking the other way. When the animations line up that way, it's a cool moment, and it totally works. Other times, the enemies will be looking right at you, and still not notice shit. But hey, no game can read your mind. Vectrex games could, but those are pretty tough to find these days.

I don't think fully realistic stealth games will ever exist, because in life, stealth barely exists. Fully realistic stealth games would be called "Getting Shot Immediately" games. And I'm guessing that those probably wouldn't catch on, unless virtual reality spawns a breed of players who love getting killed. Which, it probably will.

You're Playing It Wrong

This fight is gonna take awhile, so let's keep blabbing about stealth. Another semi-common complaint about *The Last Of Us* is that playing in a purely stealthy fashion is nigh-impossible, and that's true. *The Last Of Us* is designed for stealth to fail, and for combat situations to get crazy. That's why it's so easy to functionally reset the enemies: You're meant to get caught, and the excitement comes from trying to think your way out of that bad situation. Then you can battle everyone to the death, or run away and try again.

I never had a problem with the sometimes finicky stealth of The Last Of Us, because I gave up the idea of perfect stealth long ago. I realized that what's fun about stealth games is not playing them perfectly. What's fun is getting caught.

Dishonored

Dishonored is a great example of how adhering to stealth can hurt an experience. There seem to be a lot of Dishonored players who reloaded every time they got spotted, and I would argue that those people really haven't played the game. Granted, it's partially Dishonored's fault for rewarding an ultra-stealthy run with a "good" ending. But -- spoiler alert -- Both endings are lame. That storyline sucked a million tits. You can just watch the endings on YouTube, if you really wanna. A dumb little movie is no reason to ruin an experience for oneself.

I like making up my own rules while playing video games, and Dishonored is great for that. If you feel like dusting off your copy of Dishonored, here's a great one to try:

I heard that initially, the Blink ability was not given automatically to the player. Hence, each level was designed so that it could be completed without it. I decided to crank up the difficulty, rely only on the auto-save, and to never use magic. I bought the physical upgrades, but stopped there.

Man, that is some hard shit. I made it about three-quarters of the way through, and those were my best Dishonored adventures, hands down. I ended up playing some sections over and over -- The brothel level in particular sticks in my mind. But getting caught by a guard, rushing through the streets, clambering onto a canopy and diving through an open window -- That shit is fucking choice. It reminded me a lot of Mirror's Edge, except, you know... fun. I recommend it.

It was a lot more fun than, for example, playing through The Last Of Us without picking up any items. Which, speaking of: Let's get back to that.

This Is A Really Hard Fight

One of the brutal, but impressive things about fights in The Last Of Us is that they never play out the same way. You can memorize the types of enemies, and how many there are, but from there the situation scatters fast.

This fight in particular starts out very bottlenecked. Joel is trapped in the back of a garage, and it can take ages for the enemies to spread out naturally. So I start letting

enemies see me on purpose, just to get them moving a bit. Everything can be going great, but then some guy will jump you from behind. Even after playing through this game a bunch of times, I'm still genuinely surprised by some of the stuff these guys do.

Memorizing Perfect Dark

Really? I'm writing about Perfect Dark now? I sure am! So, the Perfect Dark story:

In 2006, I was living in Vancouver, and I was having a depressing goddamn month. I broke up with my first serious girlfriend, and was going through withdrawal at a junkie-like level. I quit my job, and basically stayed inside all the time.

Staying inside wasn't such a bad call, because it was also the darkest month on record in decades. Vancouver gets into these jags where there is "no measurable level of sunshine", which means that the sunlight is so diffused by cloud-cover that nothing casts a shadow. That month, there was no measurable level of sunshine for something like 27 days. It was crazy, and more than a little depressing.

Luckily, I was prepared. I had assembled a full Nintendo 64 from pieces I'd found at various thrift stores. The only thing I had to buy at full price was the Ram Pak, which turned out to cost more than the rest of the pieces combined.

I was a huge Goldeneye 007 fan, and had even mastered the dual-stick controls, which involved holding one controller in each hand. But I'd missed Perfect Dark when it originally came out. Finally, I could play it.

Turns out Perfect Dark isn't as good as Goldeneye, but it's not too bad. So I stayed inside, and played Perfect Dark on the highest difficulty, over and over. My brain was not in the mood to participate in real life, and Perfect Dark was my enabler.

At that difficulty, every level had to be meticulously memorized. Enemies in Perfect Dark would always react in a predictable way, so a level that started out being nearly impossible would eventually become a flawless ballet, with every maneuver executed perfectly. There were no AI surprises, such as there are in The Last Of Us.

I was about three weeks deep into this process before I admitted how much time I was wasting. But it's interesting to look back at that time, and to see how I reacted. When my brain was really hurting, this was how I looked after myself -- I started seeking out pieces to an old video game system, and then played it into the ground. That's how I kept my mind off the situation, and (presumably) slowly healed.

Growing up in the eighties, it was somehow a given that video games were bad for kids. As I got older, I would sometimes hear good stories about gaming, such as how doctors who played video games were better at performing macroscopic surgeries. Stories like that always felt like a bit of a vindication.

But it's memories like my depressing times in Vancouver that really convince me video games are important. On the surface, games can seem like a waste of time. And if you knew me in life, you might think I don't even like video games, with the amount of complaining I do about them. But video games are important. They've been a through line throughout my entire life, and when the chips are really down, they help me feel re-connected to how I was when I was young. When you've just gotta get out of your own head, and let time heal your wounds, nothing works better than a video game.

Enemy AI

I've been trying to address different criticisms of The Last Of Us that I've seen online. One of those is that some folk didn't like the enemy AI. Apparently the enemies don't behave quite like they did in pre-release footage. I'll have to take their word for it, since I only ever gave the trailers a quick once over: The fact that Naughty Dog was making a new game was enough pre-release information for me.

Frankly, we've reached a point where if you buy into the pre-release vision of how a game will be, then shame on you. It's probably better to avoid the promotional material as much as possible. Part of why I didn't delve into the Last Of Us trailers was because the Bioshock: Infinite hype let me down so hard. It's way more fun to go into a game mostly blind, rather than saddled with a lot of expectations.

That being said, I'm really not sure what online wags expected out of the Last Of Us' enemy AI. I think it's fucking sweet. Once again, I'm gonna put some blame on playing the game on Normal difficulty. If you're able to do a bunch of weird, unrealistic things without getting killed, of course the enemy AI is gonna seem spotty. They're trying to react to an unpredictable and nigh-unstoppable superman. I can't stress enough how much you fucked up if you played The Last Of Us on Normal. I will also cast aspersions on your manliness, and your femininity to boot.

This Hunter attack in Pittsburgh is the first major encounter with human enemies, and they seem a lot more realistic to me than most video game enemies do. Granted, they are cautious to a fault, allowing the player to easily reset the situation after being spotted. But that's clearly a deliberate design decision, and is fairly easy to swallow. These guys could be killed at any moment, so it's understandable that they might be a little tender-footed.

I actually think that a lack of bravado is one of the more realistic traits an enemy can possess. The baseline, set by games like Wolfenstein and Doom, was a non-stop assault by enemies. Since then, the evolution of combat AI has basically involved having enemies do anything besides that.

The way the Hunters communicate with each other particularly impresses me. It's probably just window dressing, which has no actual effect on their behavior. But it often feels real. Aimless and repetitive enemy banter is a huge sticking point for me, and will often cause me to mute a game altogether. But The Last Of Us's enemy communication rarely seems to hit a bum note.

I do think the sense of realism in The Last Of Us' combat is aided by the game's high level of violence. There is no way to relate to these people besides fighting them, but that relationship is very well represented. There's a visceral feeling to the combat; it's close, and intimate, and super fucked up feeling. Kind of like a real fight. I broke a heavy vase over my brother's head once, and he'd probably agree that it was a lot like when Joel smashes a brick over someone's head. Or, he would if he was speaking to me. Families, man. What can you do? Not hit people with vases, I guess? Huh. Sometimes, the answer is right in front of you.

Wouldn't it be weird if a therapist advised me to write this book? "Just write ten zillion words on your favorite video game. Everything will come out eventually." That'd probably be a pretty bad therapist. And if you're playing the Super Apocalypse Drinking Game, you now have to finish your drink as I mention once again that I don't have an editor.

Is that all I've got on enemy AI? I guess so. Let's discuss strangling!

Slow Strangle

I'll tell you one thing: Nathan Drake breaks necks a million times faster than Joel does. It feels strange going back to Uncharted -- Drake could flip a coin and kill two guys before it lands, whereas Joel really settles in for a nice, long strangle.

Is that all I've got on strangling? Alright, back to the actual battle!

This Fight Will Never End

This first wave of enemies is taking a fuckload of tries to get past. I keep trying, over and over and over... But, I just saw something new! I was trying to hop over a dumpster

while a bad guy was right behind me, and he grabbed my ankles and pulled me down! I've never seen that before. It was pretty cool.

I was confused by how sometimes this fight would checkpoint me at the halfway point, but most of the time would reset me to the very beginning of the fight. Eventually, I will realize that it's because I was choosing to manually restart the encounter, rather than letting myself die. The manual reset always takes you back to the very start. So this fight ended up being a little more work than it needed to be.

Sometimes when enemies notice you, they literally stumble back slightly. They're so fucking surprised to see the guy they were intently looking for, that they can't even maintain their balance. That's a little weird.

Playing By A Game's Rules

One description of Dark Souls that I always liked is that it's a game that will bend to you, but won't bend *for* you. If you learn the systems and play by the rules, you can kick that game's ass. But if you're unmindful of the game's systems, and are just blindly doing your own thing, then you're fucking dead. Dark Souls is basically a Hard difficulty that you can't turn off.

When other games are set to higher difficulties, they behave similarly. A player needs to learn the rules, because a haphazard play style will lead to a quick death. When I first played Uncharted 2 on Crushing difficulty, it seemed impossible. I thought I'd never be able to beat it, and spent a little while blaming the game for being unreasonably, uh, crushing. But in fact, despite having already beaten Uncharted 2 on Hard, I had not really learned the game's rules. Crushing difficulty forces a player to seek out the very edges of the simulation, and to learn exactly what they can and cannot do.

In Uncharted 2's case, what I eventually learned was that it rewards swashbuckling. The game is trying to emulate an adventure movie, and its systems will bend to that end. Firing short bursts blindly from cover, or spraying bullets while running, are far more accurate than they should be. If you're rolling, or leaping over things, or moving constantly between different types of cover, bullets will magically miss you. The game is trying to teach you, through the medium of your own death, that you shouldn't sit still. You shouldn't take careful aim while turtling somewhere. You're supposed to be Indiana Jones. So, fucking be Indiana Jones.

The Last Of Us has a very different set of rules. Where Nathan Drake can run straight toward a gun toting enemy and bust them in the chops, grabbing their gun smartly out of mid-air, Joel will get killed for trying to do the same. Instead of fudging the system to

help you survive, like Uncharted would, The Last Of Us will fudge the system so that you die, very suddenly and harshly. It's crystal clear about the fact that you should never, ever run at an armed opponent, and it isn't kidding. Even an enemy in the midst of one of those "backwards shock stumbles" will immediately recover, and immediately shoot you in the throat.

I think that's a great example of how gameplay can help tell a game's story: Uncharted is about swashbuckling, and The Last Of Us is about strategy. Unless you have a winning lottery ticket made out of four-leaf clovers, swashbuckling is not in Joel's best interest.

One Hour Of Fighting

Holy fuck. Like the museum fight, this Pittsburgh battle almost made the wheels fall off my "itemless playthrough" idea. I almost beat it on the very first try, but then things went bad. I had to try over and over, for an hour. I finally put on a podcast, just to give myself something else to focus on. It's tougher not being able to hear the game audio, but the podcast helped change my internal unit of measurement. Instead of, "I've reset this fight dozens of times", it became, "I've been re-trying this fight for one podcast". That doesn't sound nearly as bad.

In the end, one bad guy gets two solid hits on me with a big piece of wood, and I lose one point of health. But I make it through, and that's good enough. Seeing all the bottles laying around the battlefield, and thinking of the bullets sitting in my inventory... I was almost salivating with a desire to shoot some of these assholes, or to break bottles over their garbage heads.

The thing is, this game is supposed to feel dirty. It's supposed to feel like a scramble. Every fight is supposed to push you up against the wall. You're not supposed to get through fights without getting hurt, and certainly not without using any weapons. It's becoming obvious that this play style is starting to butt up against reality. I'm pushing this game's systems into some fairly audacious places.

I've made it this far basically unscathed, but I think that goal is becoming unrealistic. From now on, taking a little damage during fights will officially become okay. I'm not gonna retry a fight just because I took a punch. But I'm still gonna try to limit the damage per fight to one health bar. If some guy manages to put a bullet in me, that's a re-start, for sure.

Heading Deeper Into The Pitt

This whole Pittsburgh situation is pretty suspect. Setting up a bus to t-bone tourists would be really difficult. Do they reset it every time? It seems pretty dang immobile, so much so that we can't get past it. Go under it? No room! Through it? It's got, like, magic windows or something. Around it? It's perfectly wedged into the alley, I'm afraid.

So there's no heading back the way we came. Gotta go deeper into Pittsburgh. I'm not saying I have a better idea as to how to push the game forward, I'm just saying that this setup does not conform to reality.

But fuck it, I don't wanna go back anyway! So Joel pries open a garage door, and he and Ellie head through.

Back in Bill's town, we had passed a pile of burned Infected. Joel told Ellie not to look, but she said she's seen worse. Here, there are a bunch of human bodies. Way more gnarly. But I guess it's all relative; Ellie has already seen Joel smash a bunch of people's heads in, which is even worse still.

That's definitely a narrative corner that action games get trapped in -- No matter how well-told and well-integrated the story, the basic gameplay is always far more terrible and violent than anything the narrative can throw your way.

On the wall is a manifest written by the Hunter group. It says that three small groups traveled through here in the past three days. That seems like a fair amount of traffic. Though they weren't all necessarily people coming into town -- Maybe some of them were locals that the Hunters tracked down.

This brings me back to the elaborate design of the Hunter's ambush. Is ambushing people in cars the norm? The manifest doesn't mention finding any working cars. The whole Pittsburgh set up is definitely a touch more fuzzy and contrived than most of the setups in this game. Not that I'm complaining. Just noticing.

Joel tells Ellie a bit about how the Hunters work, and that he knows this because he used to take part in similar ambushes.

"How many people have you killed?" Ellie asks.

Joel doesn't answer.

Ellie says, "I'll take it that means a lot."

"Take it however you want."

It's a pretty big reveal that goes by quickly, because Ellie doesn't have enough power in the relationship to push any questioning. But the fact that Joel was a Hunter is a key point to his character, and a key point toward explaining his later behavior.

Hunter Joel

It's not surprising that Joel has killed a lotta people. Ellie just saw him kill ten people in the past few minutes. But that was in self-defense; being a Hunter is about openly preying on the innocent. To join with the Hunters, and to murder and rob anyone you can find -- That's a level of moral bankruptcy beyond what we've seen from Joel.

But it's not surprising. Even something as awful as joining the Hunters seems fairly justifiable, after an apocalypse. For the world to have changed so severely, in a way that no one could have seriously entertained until it actually happened -- It must have felt unreal. Like walking through a dream, with the old way of life completely gone.

That sense of unreality would make it much easier to discard the old rules. If everyone in the world is trying to kill you, it makes sense to join a gang, and to kill them mother-fuckers pre-emptively. Being evil would be better than being powerless.

They say the best villains are justified in their own minds, but villains rarely actually pan out that way. Sure, the Joker feels justified in poisoning a water supply, so that everyone dies wearing a giant grin -- He feels that way because he's fucking crazy. That doesn't mean it's a justifiable way to act.

Joel, on the other hand, really is one of those villains. Joel is a bad dude, but the path that led him to that state is easy to see, and is basically justifiable. If we were in his shoes, most of us would have followed that same path. If we didn't, we'd be dead. There are no atheists in a foxhole, and there are no altruists in an apocalypse.

Female Hunters

There are no female Hunters in *The Last Of Us*, which is something I saw brought up many times online. It seems like a bit of an odd place to call for gender equality. "Hey, women can be amoral murderers, just as much as men can! My sister is a murderer! Where's her representation?"

The lack of female Hunters doesn't strike me as particularly odd. In a society as brutal as

the Hunters, it's easy to imagine that they'd have a "no women and no kids" mentality while assembling raiding parties. Henry mentions that they don't tolerate having kids around at all; basically, the Pittsburgh Hunters are fucking psycho.

So I'm okay with all of these Hunters being men. If that makes me sexist, then curse these fingers! Curse them, and their misguided ways! Forgive them, for they know not what they type! And let the record show that my mom thinks I'm cool. God bless.

That being said, it would have been neat to include some female Hunters. From what I've read about primal societies, many had surprisingly progressive ideals; men who were more inclined toward domestic pursuits were happily accepted into female roles within the tribe. It would then stand to reason that women would also be accepted into what are traditionally considered more male roles, should murder be what they were most interested in.

The actual reason for a lack of female Hunters, according to an interview with Neil Druckmann, is strictly due to the memory budget on the PS3. Both genders would have been represented if the system could have supported it. But I think the all-male raiding parties work: This is not a society that has had time to develop. It's still bringing shortsighted blight to whatever crosses its path. So it seems believable that only men would populate the Hunter gangs, while women would fulfill different roles back at base camp. Call them insecure -- They are wantonly murdering everyone they meet, after all.

In life, I believe that all genders should be treated equally. In art, I do think that treating women and men identically is somewhat artistically suspect. Making half of your murderers female is, in a certain light, a step toward equality. But it definitely lacks nuance. Really, having any hard-and-fast rule is never gonna garner the best result, as well-meaning as that rule may be.

Gender

Gender roles are obviously a touchy subject, particularly on the internet. But I like that they are -- The internet is often a hysterical and hyperbole-filled place, but I'm proud that this generation is making changes to the status quo.

For example, I'm proud that Tecmo decided not to release DOAX3 in North America, because we're viewed as a hostile environment for their pedo nonsense. When your game involves a young teen who is functionally nude, dancing on a stripper pole, the environment *should* be hostile. You can't just say that a child is 18 years old and get away with it. You've really gotta cut that shit out, Japan. It's fucked up and weird; women play video games, children play video games, everyone plays video games. If

nerds wanna mail order DOA, more power to 'em, but we really don't need that bizarre shit on the shelf of every video game store.

So while the people wagging their fingers for social justice are often the most annoying among us, I do like that social change is happening. I like that these discussions are happening. If I have a daughter one day, I like that she'll grow up in a society that is somewhat less mired in absurd, inappropriate bullshit. So cheers, warriors! No matter how annoying you may be!

But if you could, try to save your full vitriol for the real issues. Issues such as whether Fallout 4 and Bioshock: Infinite were as good as they could have been. We need to keep our eyes steady on the horizon, and to strive for a better tomorrow.

This chapter was written while sitting on a giant rock, at Whytecliff Park in West Vancouver. Holy fuck, I love technology. God damn, man. In the Fifties, I would have been hunched over a typewriter, chain-smoking and taking "diet pills" that are actually amphetamines. This sitting-in-nature stuff... this is some pretty good stuff.

Societal Collapse

Joel and Ellie pass a body that's been strung up, with a warning message scrawled next to it. That got me to thinkin': Would the post-apocalypse world really be this bad?

In our current world, assault and lawbreaking are almost statistically insignificant. I can only speak for the First World, but 'round here, most people are gonna make it to a ripe old age without losing even a single limb. If human civilization were a superhero movie, the good guys have won. The bad guys are only making tiny dents in the juggernaut of stability that has been built.

The more dramatic and probably high-school-aged among us may argue that the human race is a force of *grrreat evil*. But the truth is that bad people are not the true representatives of humanity -- They're only a small aberration. The villains are not the ones setting the pace for the human race.

So, things are pretty stable right now. But I can't say that that's how things are, *fundamentally*. Ultimately, human beings are just animals -- If we're pitted against enough pressure, our biological needs and fear of death will probably win out over our higher values.

I've heard it said that society would collapse after only 48 hours without food. We're

only 48 hours away from anarchy at any given time, which is a pretty spooky thought. I feel like that number is probably exaggerated, but after twenty years of pressure, collapse would certainly ensue.

Right now, a life of crime is a tough thing. You're at a huge disadvantage, as all of our societal systems are primed and ready to stamp out your bullshit. But after a certain point, the tables would turn. After long enough, maybe the villains *would* become the representatives of humanity. The bad guys would be the ones setting the pace, and the good people would be the ones barely making a dent. Kids would be raised with a violent set of values, and the etch-a-sketch of society would get shaken, then redrawn into something else.

What the fuck am I even talking about? Is anyone following this shit? Maybe some people would indeed get strung up, is all I'm trying to say. Jesus fucking christ! Just spit it out, kid! I'm wearing myself out, here.

Comics

Joel finds a comic book in an abandoned vehicle. "Hey Ellie!" he says. "I found one of them comic books you've been reading!"

"Oh, cool," she replies, and her tone could be interpreted as being disinterested. Maybe her mind is still plunged deep into ponderings about the fall of civilization. Or maybe Joel's Daddening has already begun. He really only knows one thing about Ellie: That she likes comic books. So he's leaning on that one thing, as a half-assed way to connect with her.

Chatter

It really astounds me how many ways the gameplay and narrative of *The Last Of Us* successfully intertwine. There are so many connections, that some of them have to be happy accidents. For example, Joel's prickly personality helps explain his intermittent dialogue.

Convincing in-game dialogue has long been a problem for video games. As soon as cd-roms allowed for recorded dialogue, we started being treated to a procession of stilted, stiff, awkward weirdos. In theory, in-game dialogue was a move toward realism. In actuality, nothing breaks the illusion of immersion as quickly as a character firing off a limited set of quips at a peculiar time, then falling mysteriously silent.

With Joel, occasional small bursts of dialogue make sense. He's a taciturn Texan, and his brains may be a bit scrambled to boot. There's not gonna be a lotta chatter with him.

More and more, Joel seems like the perfect action-game character. Yes, he's a psycho. But other game characters go on crazed shooting-sprees *without* being psychos. Joel really is about the only honest representation of the kind of character who would exist in an action game. So don't hate the player, playa. Cheah!

Three Little Hunters

Joel and Ellie hear some Hunters, and take cover. There are three of them, strolling casually along, talking among themselves. I take my time, trying to decide how I should kill them.

But while I'm hiding out, the Hunters decide they're tired of waiting for their friends, so they head onward. I didn't know that could happen. Cool.

There's a sign scrawled on the wall, demanding that the Military distribute more rations. Ellie mentions that there were never ration shortages in Boston, and Joel says there definitely were. That suggests that the central area of the Boston QZ was pretty well off; Ellie and the other Army brats were well-protected enough that they managed to never experience a shortage. Good on ya, crazed Military.

The Bookstore Encounter

The next big battle is in a two story bookstore, with an open 2nd floor. On my first playthrough, this fight was a total clusterfuck. I ended up scamming a win by hiding outside a window near the back stairs, and killing guys one at a time as they leapt through. It was really cheap, and I wasn't proud of it. But that's how a first playthrough goes; everything base and pathetic in your nature comes to the surface, as you look for any way you can find to scrounge out a victory.

Exploiting Systems

I always thought one of the more interesting aspects of a lifetime spent playing video games is that we game-players have a ton of experience with identifying the limits of a system, and then breaking those systems.

Say you're playing Fallout: New Vegas, and you get stuck because that game is a glitchy

fuckfest. But then you use your knowledge of glitchy pieces of shit to glitch yourself past that roadblock, and back onto the course proper.

With enough video game experience, that kind of journey outside the boundaries becomes not a happy accident, but something you're reasonably certain you can accomplish. At that point, you're not even playing the actual game anymore. You're playing a meta game on top of a meta game, and that's some crazy shit.

I'm not sure what practical use that experience carries, but surely it has some application in real life. When I figure out how to hack Wall Street through glitch-theory, I'll write an update to this segment. Six months from now, tops.

Bookstore Punchup

As I got better at *The Last Of Us*, this bookstore fight became one of my favorite sections. It's really different and unique each time, and I eventually learned that it's also totally optional. It's a huge, elaborate fight, but you can just cruise right past it. Crazy.

I was intending to bravely murder all these fine young men, but now I don't know... That last fight was ridiculously punishing, and if this fight gives me that same kind of trouble, I might tap out. Besides, there ain't no shame in sneaking. Any sneaker will tell you that. I sure wish I had a bottle or two, to lure enemies away. Bottles and bricks really are the weapons I miss most of all.

I take out one guy on the bottom floor, then creep upstairs, and slowly take out the few people up there. At that point, if I wanna skip the fight, I'm home free. Should I double back, and find the people I haven't killed? That would be madness. So I just keep moving.

I've never gone through that encounter so unseen. That was super smooth. Nice!

Stairs

As a quick aside, the bookstore fight is where I first learned that it's never a good idea to fight on stairs. *The Last Of Us* doesn't handle stairs very well; all kinds of weird clipping and odd attacks can happen. Sometimes the glitchiness works in your favor, but it's better to stay on flat ground, where things are more predictable. In this case, glitches are not your friend! And that's one to grow on!

*Selective Realism
(The Grand Theft Auto 4 Effect)*

I know you can't question game logic too much, without becoming a really annoying guy. But once Joel realizes that bottles are his ultimate weapon, you'd think he would cram a few into his backpack. Maybe leave that homemade flamethrower behind, and bring an empty six pack instead.

It reminds me of the health system in Grand Theft Auto 4: All Nico needed to make everything all right was a hot dog. A single hot dog meant life or death to him. So half the game saw me running around, trying to find a hot dog vendor. But if you drove too close to a hot dog stand, the vendor would get scared and run off. And Nico would not steal a dog, because... I don't know why. He's a massively stupid man, I guess.

Sometimes, the hotdog vendor would just plain not be there. Because that's "realistic". In the couple of years I spent in New York, I never once saw an unlocked, unmanned hotdog cart. Maybe the day Rockstar was doing New York recon was also the one day that a hotdog guy was on the payphone around the corner, fighting desperately for custody of his kids. Maybe they just like making their games less fun for no goddamn reason. Either way, that kind of "realism-over-fun" nonsense is, in a nutshell, why Grand Theft Auto 4 sucked so bad. Go back and try to play that game; it's a nonstop barrage of annoying, anti-player bullshit.

I was once running from the Liberty City PD, and made my way into a subway. There, I had to wait *four minutes* for the next scheduled subway to arrive. It really took the pizzazz out of that chase. Why couldn't the game fudge the schedule, so that a subway arrived just in time to whisk me away? Was Rockstar worried about ruining the simulation for the other simulated people? I'm the only one who's real! If it's not a critical detail, then make things fun for me! Hook me up with some of that gamey-ass Sleeping Dogs, any day.

Anyway, the point I'm trying to make is that if Nico had a backpack full of hot dogs, his life woulda gone a lot smoother. Even just cramming a raw dog into each pocket would have improved his day immensely. Another option would be to lodge one dog partway down his throat, and expertly swallow it at the appropriate time. Anything to avoid cruising the city, bleeding to death, desperately trying not to scare away the guy selling hot dogs. I bet all real-life thugs thought, "Wow... this is exactly like my life."

Post-Bookstore

After the bookstore fight, there's a shiv door with an X painted on it. It was ages before I

ever noticed that door. This time I don't have any shivs, because I don't have any anything. So let's hop inside that door through the magic of the Last Of Us wiki:

Inside is a note written by a mother. Her son died, so now Mom is retaliating, by taking up arms to fuck some shit up.

After reading the note, Joel says to himself, "Well, with that kind of thinking, no one wins..." Haha. Sure, Joel. Lay that eye-for-an-eye wisdom on us. Old level headed Joel... But I guess everyone thinks they're the sensible one, even if they're a psycho. Probably especially if they're a psycho.

Characterization In Video Games

The overall lore of the Pittsburgh section doesn't gel as well for me as the rest of the game does. There are a lot of small details that don't fully add up.

For example, does this shiv-door note really seem like it was written by a mother? Maybe... But maybe not. It's not badly done, it's just not convincing enough for me to immediately buy in. Instead, it gets me wondering about whether it really makes sense, and once I have that thought enough times, the whole fiction of the area starts to gradually unravel.

One of the greatest signs that Steve Gaynor is an amazing writer is his ability, in Gone Home, to emulate different types of writing. That game has good writing, and bad writing, and kid's writing. It even has bad writing that sounds like it might be fun to read, and it's all very deliberate. I wonder why I didn't write a book about Gone Home? Surely that book would be finished by now. This one's not even half done. Well, live and learn.

Apparently the trophy for unlocking all the shiv doors is called "Master of Unlocking". Haha!

Shitty Voice Acting As Expressed Through The Medium Of Resident Evil 1

When the first Resident Evil came out, it was a sweet game. It was like Alone In The Dark, but with better graphics. When those dogs jumped through the window, my friend Jay threw the fucking controller. That shit was scary, man.

The writing and acting in Resident Evil was insanely dogshit, but that made me love the

game even more. "Jill, here's a lock pick. It might come in handy if you, the master of unlocking, take it with you." That stuff was awesome, a hilarious send-up of old, shitty horror movies. In 1996, the term "meta" was rarely in use -- Resident Evil was miles ahead of the curve in the ironic self-awareness department. I loved it.

But there was the possibility that it wasn't clever at all. It might have just been a really poor job done by some audio directors at Capcom, who didn't realize how awful a job they had done. So I waited with bated breath -- whatever that means -- to see how Resident Evil 2 would handle its dialogue.

Resident Evil 2 was a pretty great game, but the audio had been "upgraded". It was only blandly terrible, the same way that every video game was terrible. It wasn't super-amazing-terrible, like the original. Man, that was a downer.

I still love Resident Evil's dialogue, for how awesomely it sucks. But it's sad to know that it wasn't supposed to be that way. They thought it was totally rad when someone proclaimed, "Stay away from the door, Jill! I'm going to kick this door down!" But in reality, they were just wildly inept.

Pittsburgh Lore

I'm trying to piece together the overall Pittsburgh story, and it seems a little hard to follow. I guess the Fireflies helped destabilize the Military; then an independent group of rebelling civilians turned against both the Military and the Fireflies, becoming the Hunters that we're now fighting. I guess it's not really that complicated. But it never feels quite clear while I'm playing.

When asked if there was anything he wished he had done differently in The Last Of Us, I heard Bruce Straley say that he might have considered including a Head-Of-The-Hunters type character during this section. It's a bit of a catch-22: Having a distinct leader might give the Pittsburgh enemies a more easily digestible story. But it also might seem less realistic for Joel to run afoul of some charismatic, ever-present evil dude. Sometimes, there ain't no clear answer. Life, man. Life.

Aiming For The Bridge

There's a sign saying which way to turn to get to the bridge, with the name of the bridge deliberately crossed out in red paint. I wonder if a tourist did that, to let people know that the bridge is destroyed? Not that Joel would have listened. The more I think about that bus from the initial Pittsburgh ambush, the more I think Joel is double psycho.

"Welp, no way around this bus. We'll have to head deeper into the city."

"We could go under it, or over it. Or through it. There are, like, six ways past it."

"Come follow me through this garage, Ellie. We gotta go deeper. Gotta choke people with our hands. No other choice."

Maybe Ellie's a figment of Joel's imagination. Maybe she went back up to the highway, and left him muttering to himself.

Old Flags

There are a lot of old American flags in The Last Of Us, but the ones in Pittsburgh look way worse than the rest. They're all fucked up.

I grew up in Canada, and I always thought America seemed pretty cool. Then I moved to New York City for a couple of years, and took a bunch of trips to the other nearby cities, and, yeesh... No offense, America, but your shit is coming apart at the seams. It's a crazy goddamn country full of crazy goddamn people. I really didn't like the feeling of being there. So actually, feel free to take offense, because what I just said is pretty offensive.

But there's something about a dirty American flag that still seems pretty cool. I felt the same way when I saw the ragged flags in Red Dead Redemption -- A trampled flag gives one the feeling of the fictional America. The *storybook* America. The one that's tough, and brave, and righteous.

That place is a total goddamn lie... but it sure is a nice story.

Talking With Ellie

The optional conversation system, where a triangle icon appears over Ellie's head, is a bit weird. I kept missing out on it -- On my first playthrough, I didn't hear any of Ellie's jokes. I heard her say something about needing to lighten the mood, but I was too busy foraging to notice her talking prompt.

The optional conversation in this section is particularly egregious: You need to back track a few meters, go stand near an advertisement, wait for Ellie to comment on it, then wait for the icon to appear over her head. That's a lot more standing still and deliberately watching Ellie than I ever generally do.

There are a fair few of the optional dialogues that I only found after looking up a list online. In this game, I would like to hear the dialogue. It would be okay with me if it were a little less hidden.

Introducing: The Super-Truck

Joel swims over to grab a pallet, and the Super-Truck drives ominously by. Duuuuh DUH! Duuuuh DUH! That's the Jaws music.

Uncharted 2 In: Kamikaze Tank

Remember the tank that chases you in Uncharted 2? I love how in Uncharted games, every edge-case will happen: Every bridge will break, every handheld will come lose. You always expect it, but it's still always awesome.

The tank might be my favorite example. It drives partially over the lip of a cliff, just to freak you out. It's not gonna catch you that way -- Some guy driving was just like, "Hey, watch this. I'm gonna make Nathan Drake shit his goddamn pants." Then he gunned it for the cliff, stopping one inch away from his own total doom.

I'm sure everyone else in the tank shit their pants, too. People who were only standing around watching shit their pants. When somebody radioed back to HQ to report about how the tank was teetering over the edge of the abyss just to surprise one guy, the officer in charge shit his pants. Whoever was driving that tank -- He's a true prankster hero.

Coffee Shop

Our apocalypse pals head into an old coffee shop, and I like Joel's little run about how he misses coffee. That happens in the hotel across the street, but close enough.

Somehow, it never occurred to me that coffee would be gone. That would fucking suck. Maybe Joel managed to smuggle in some instant coffee, once in awhile. A nice tin of Folgers Crystals. But real coffee is long gone, and that's pretty sad, man.

Ellie asks Joel, "Did you go to coffee shops a lot?"

"I did. All the time."

"And what would you get?"

"Just... just coffee."

Haa. Joel. So plain. Those were the days, before he knew the frothy tang of violence. The frothy tang of *blood*. Just... havin' a coffee.

I'm sorta surprised that Ellie has enough awareness of coffee shop culture to know that they served more than just regular coffee. It's like coffee shops have passed into legend -- These shops, which were sprinkled all over, and which served all of these fancy drinks... The romantic, old coffee world.

Memento Mori

I really like apocalypse stories, as a way to remind me to really appreciate my life. The fact that I can go to a coffee shop, listen to music and read a book while I drink a fancy ass coffee -- That's fucking amazing.

I get a similar feeling from looking at old photographs. Obviously life in the past wasn't all bad, and some aspects of it were pretty amazing. But there was also a lot of horrible shit, and being reminded of that makes it so much easier to put the luckiness of my present life into perspective.

I once saw a picture of a little girl at an orphanage, praying at her bed, under a sign that said, "Jesus First, Others Second, You Last." She was deeply under the thumb of other people, and I felt really bad for her.

My life couldn't be more different than that -- I can pursue literally whatever I'm interested in. I'm writing an ebook about The Last Of Us, for god's sake. My "job" is to play a video game, with new rules of my own devising, and to write about it. It's like a miracle life. This kind of existence would be completely unfathomable to that kid. I should be deliriously happy every single day.

But everything is relative; it's easy to lose sight of how good things are. Ten minutes from now, I'll probably forget again. So that's why I like depressing art, or reminders about depressing moments in time. They help me remember to be appreciative of what I've got.

The Hotel Lobby

Speaking of depressing moments which help you appreciate the present: We use a plank to head across the flooded street, and into the hotel. I think the flooded hotel lobby is

real pretty. I love this room, maybe more than any other space in the game.

Joel mentions that this hotel would have been too rich for his blood, and Ellie pretends to check in. Being here makes the enormity of how much has been lost seem really clear. Even in this dilapidated state, it's still amazing to see. It's nice that a place like this ever existed, even if it is over now.

On my first playthrough, I missed the training manual in this section, which lets you get multiple hits out of your shivs. Missing that manual weighed on me for the rest of that playthrough; on my first time through, those shivs really seemed like everything.

The Hotel Hallways

A little further into the hotel, we overhear some Hunters:

"You bit?"

"Not today. You?"

"Not today."

I like the fatalism in how "Not today" has become a common turn of phrase. Nobody got bit today, but it's understood that it's gonna happen, and probably soon.

I get punched by a Hunter, and I'm trying to decide if I should restart the encounter. I only took one punch, and maybe things would be more exciting if I just roll with whatever happens. But I'm worried of ending up somewhere brutal like Ish's sewer, and not having enough life to brute-force my way through.

The choice is made for me, because after the scrimmage I somehow end up stuck shin deep inside a pile of laundry. I can't move at all. It's the first time I've ever gotten caught on the level architecture. But it came at a good time, so a restart it is.

We head deeper into the hotel, and the line of sight of these enemies really doesn't make much sense. As long as you're crouched behind something, and you stay right up against it, they won't see you. Even if they're standing on the other side and looking right at you, they'll be too polite to mention it. It's pretty eerie, when a dude is staring you down, and then just walks away. Maybe he wants to get killed. Maybe we've entered into a silent pact.

After a couple of failed attempts, I manage to make it through the whole hotel while

only having to choke out three people. Not bad! I'm barely a murderer.

Man, if this game were designed to be played weaponless, it would be the weirdest game ever. Post Apocalypse Choker. The story of a man who choked his way across America. Rated PEGI 18, for "multiple, motiveless killings".

Elevator Shaft

We get to an elevator shaft, and Joel falls the fuck down it. I didn't watch a ton of pre-release videos about *The Last Of Us*, but I definitely saw this part. I expected the game overall to be more like a re-skinned *Uncharted*, with a ton of scripted falling and tumbling and whatnot. The *Uncharted* games are like a series of spikes, with a lot of ups and downs. *The Last Of Us* is more of a flat plane, a continuous trudge forward.

I don't take any damage from that fall, so that's nice. I'm still at 4/5.

Ellie is alone at the top of the elevator shaft, and yells, "I'm gonna climb down there, okay?" But Joel tells her to stay put. It must be scary for her, being up there all alone. That hotel is full of goons, and they must have heard that noise. Having to find someplace to hide, and then just waiting... that's pretty frightening. It's better that she didn't come down, though, based on all the fucking Infected I'm about to run into.

Joel talks to himself quite a lot as he makes his way through the basement, which is a huge pet peeve of mine in all media. But again, Naughty Dog takes the terrible and makes it okay. It's a relatively short segment, which probably helps.

Moron Babble *aka Lara Croft's Logorrhea*

Lara Croft talked to herself so much in the 2013 *Tomb Raider* that I could have killed myself. It was always the dopiest, most moronic phrases. Even a person with a predilection toward talking to themselves would never say half of the crap that tumbled out of that lady's face.

I guess it was a way to avoid quest arrows and text popups, but it sure didn't work. In cases like that, I sometimes try to pretend that the character is drunk. Come to think of it, I'm pretty sure that every character in the history of media is actually pretty wasted, or at least has a good buzz on. Nobody in life speaks their mind like they do in a story.

Drowning

I mess up this underwater section pretty good, and run out of air. Joel takes a little drowning damage, so I decide to wait for him to fully drown, and try again.

The drowning damage seems to get smaller and smaller as Joel approaches death. The game really doesn't want you to drown. That's nice of it -- If you were swimming along and just barely made it out of the water alive, that'd feel pretty bad ass. It's fucking annoying when you're trying to drown yourself, though. Let me die, Last Of Us! It's my right! You can't force me to suffer!!

Grounded Mode

I did this book's itemless playthrough before the release of Grounded mode, but later tried it on my friend Craig's PS4. I also did the itemless run on his PS3, so he deserves a special benefactor thanks, for sure.

I fired up Grounded difficulty, and started plowing through the game as quickly as I could. I didn't search areas properly, and left a lot of items behind, because frankly, I had gotten pretty full of myself. If I didn't need items on Survivor difficulty, how much worse could Grounded be?

Lemme tell you, Grounded is pretty damn hard. In my first play session, I made it to this section, the basement generator. Then I died a shitload of times. It eventually got kind of embarrassing, so I hung up the controller until another day.

Grounded Mode removes onscreen indicators, so you can't easily tell how much life you have. That turns out not to matter too much, because nearly everything kills you in one hit anyway. If you get shot and live, you can count yourself lucky. At full life things aren't quite so deadly, but since you can never tell how much life you have, you end up running around half-dead most of the time. Every enemy becomes like a Clicker, including the humans, because if they get their hands on you, you're fucking dead.

However, despite an occasional choke-point, Grounded Mode was clearly easier than my itemless playthrough. Having bricks and guns at my disposal felt like I'd activated a cheat code. As for the idea of an itemless Grounded Mode playthrough: Get outta here. That'd be ridiculous. When I get my own PS4, I might try it. But for now I'm thankful that I don't have one, because I'm sure it will be miserable.

30 FPS

After the Grounded playthrough, I did yet another playthrough, back on the PlayStation 3. This time I played with the "gore" option turned off, just to check it out. And also because I apparently have nothing better to do than to play The Last Of Us over and over.

I was surprised by how easily I returned to the PS3 version -- Last Of Us: Remastered looks amazing, but the PS3 version looks amazing as well. Once you've hit "amazing" status, the specific gradations don't matter too much. If you're worried about playing The Last Of Us on PS3 now that Remastered is available, don't sweat it. Both versions hold up great.

But I noticed something odd about the 30 Frames Per Second mode on PlayStation 4: It's meant to emulate the 30 FPS presentation of the PS3 release, but to me, it looks much worse. 30 Frames Per Second on PlayStation 3 looks fantastic, while 30 FPS on PlayStation 4 makes Joel seem like a stoned guy having a seizure.

It's like the PS4 version is slandering the PS3 version. Were they trying to convince everyone that 30 FPS on PS3 sucked, when it didn't? Did I have some tv settings set up wrong? I'm really not sure what was going on, but 30 FPS on PS4 really looks like crap.

The Hotel Basement

A bunch of rats are driven toward Joel as he enters a spore-filled area of the hotel basement. It's a nice touch, but I'm not sure what they're specifically afraid of. It must be the disappearing / re-appearing Bloater.

If you head to the second floor and grab the keycard, you'll see an Infected run past the door as you turn around. The Last Of Us doesn't pull those horror game tricks very often, but it's a nice touch here.

I hate these Infected that start their life running around all crazily. Stalkers, I guess. But they ain't stalking, they're going fucking hog wild. There are only four of them here, but the timing to get the first punch on them is brutal. They're very erratic, and presumably the player is meant to use a gun.

It seems to help if you run toward them before punching, because if they come to you they get a chance to hit you with a big, clubbing swing. But I'm not sure if running really does help, or if I just happen to get some lucky hits.

During one of my attempts to box these assholes, I manage to punch one right through the floor. The camera follows him for some reason, and stays hovering down around my feet. Then the camera drifts back up as the Infected runs up the incline to the second floor. It's pretty weird.

Once I punch all these assholes, I head for the generator. If you try to fire up the genny without clearing the area, the Infected will run up behind you and BITE YOUR FACE!! AAAHHH, ZOMBIES!!!

Apparently, you can pull-start generators with one button press, if you hit right when the indicator is on the line. Sort of like playing Great Golf on the Sega Master System, a reference that I'm sure we can all appreciate. I've never managed to do it, but it's a cool feature. Maybe on a one-pull, you could start the generator without getting bitten by Infected. If someone else writes a Last Of Us book, try that out for me.

So I've got my keycard, the area is clear, I crank up the generator, and I take a wrong turn. I end up climbing some stairs I don't usually take, and I don't quite know where I am. The screen suddenly shakes from the magically appearing Bloater, throwing spore bombs my way. So I book it, and in my panic, I run all the way to the keycard door and don't see a single enemy.

Maybe no new enemies spawn alongside the Bloater, and I had just never taken the time to kill them all before? Or maybe I just got lucky. I don't know. It could be anything. What is this, the Brady Games guide to The Last Of Us? If it was, would it include the phrase "Ten million liters of snot and puke were fired into the face of a maggot-filled bear corpse that's been sitting on the counter of a convenience store while people uncomfortably tried to buy sundries without touching it"? Pretty fucking unlikely, my lad. It probably wouldn't even contain the phrase "my lad". But this book sure does. This book has both.

Editor's note: It's weird to write something, forget that you wrote it, and then come back months later to give it the old once-over. Apparently I thought that was funny, at one point? Well, too late to fix it now.

Additional Editor's Note: It's not too late. You could change it any time.

Original Editor's Note: Heyyyyy... fuck you budday. Next section!

Ellie's First Murder

Back in the hotel proper, Joel takes out some dudes, sets up a ladder, climbs up the

ladder, and gets kicked off the ladder.

The kickee then tries to drown Joel in a shallow pool of water. The way Joel scrambles for his gun, his arm getting more erratic, the bad guy grabbing at Joel's arm and finally pinning it -- That's really well done. Joel's totally done for.

And then Ellie grabs the gun and shoots the guy! Kablammo!

You ever Google a word, just to see if you spelled it right? I'm proud to announce that I nailed it with "Kablammo".

At this point, Joel and Ellie are clearly a team. They're deep into this journey, and wouldn't have survived this long without each other. But Joel is still trying to deny it. He expresses this denial through the medium of "gruff Texas jerky-man-ness." I did not Google that term, but I'm sure it's fine.

Getting yelled at for saving Joel's life is definitely not the reunion Ellie was anticipating. Joel tells her she should have held back like he told her, and that it's too dangerous for her to have a gun. He goes off to check out a side section, saying, "Stay there, ok?"

"Sure, Joel." Ellie sounds perfectly disdainful, and when Joel comes back, she's not just standing around like a regular video game character would. Instead, she's sitting on a table, waiting. It's a small detail, but damn, it's so good. This game is so good.

So Good

Man, isn't it great when stuff is good? There's so much stuff in the world that sucks. Just a huge, heavy mass of sucky stuff, weighing down everything, being sucky.

Then, once in awhile, something comes out that's super good. And it's such a nice feeling. It's nice to feel nice, you know? It's just... real nice.

The Ballroom

Joel and Ellie continue exploring, and Ellie says, "Just tell me where to go."

Joel mutters, "I hate this crap," clearly referring to having to deal with the emotions of another person. I bet he hates doing that more than he hates the apocalypse. He's dealing with the apocalypse pretty well, all things considered.

This hotel ballroom reminds me a lot of the ship in Uncharted 3. You play that game, Joel? No? You, Ellie? Well, fine. Why don't I just go FUCK MYSELF, then.

Ellie tries to explain herself, saying she wasn't trying to disobey Joel. He just seemed to be in a bad spot, and she was trying to help.

I can see why Ellie's so pissed. There's nothing worse than having to explain yourself to somebody when you really haven't done anything wrong. It's some real power-trip bullshit. There's a definite limit to how long you can deal with people who are like that. Though I guess having to rely on them to keep you alive during the apocalypse probably extends that time by quite a bit.

Ellie Gets Armed

We come upon an open square, and Joel gives Ellie a rifle, telling her to watch over him. This is one of my favorite cutscenes. The way Joel explains the gun really feels like how a Texan guy would explain a gun -- He lays it out casually, as something he's comfortable with. "Just tug it." Of course, I'm saying this as a Canadian who doesn't know shit about guns, or anything else, including Canada.

Joel says that if he gets into trouble, she needs to make every shot count. Ellie looks straight at him and says, "I got this." Goddamn, that's so bad ass. Fuck Kratos, and all these other supposedly "tough" characters. Those motherfuckers are silly. I wanna be bad ass the way that Ellie is bad ass.

The idea here is that Ellie won't fire until Joel gets spotted. Then, she'll supply backup. This fight's a kick in the dick at the best of times, so using my bare hands is gonna be tough.

Joel creeps onto the battlefield, and hears the Hunters freaking out about how many of their crew are dead. This one tourist killed 'em! What the fuck!?

It is somewhat unlikely that Joel would be able to take out so many people, but I like how the story acknowledges it. After all, this is the guy who will arguably cause the downfall of the entire human race. It's fair to grant him some minor-mythic status.

I had an easier time navigating this arena once I realized that you could climb up the truck at the back. At first, I thought the back section was a dead-end, making it a terrible place to get caught. But you can climb up the truck and onto the second floor walkway, completing the loop around the level. Once I sorted that out, this became one of my favorite fights.

I head to that back area, and find some little birds on a grill. These guys were setting up for a barbecue. Hey guys! Sorry that I'm gonna ruin your party by killing you! I didn't know that was today!

I take out four guys before they finally find one of the corpses. That breaks them into a tracking pattern, and they start slowly stalking me. I've said this before, but this game is so much better without Listen mode. It feels so much more tense. I still occasionally catch myself edging my actually body upward, to try to look over cover.

A dude is perched at the corner of the second floor walkway, and I'm watching him quietly through the window. Then there's a sudden spray of blood as Ellie shoots him. Bam! I didn't expect that! It's a shame this sniper-dynamic doesn't get used more often, 'cause I like it.

I love how visually open this arena is. If you're hesitant about giving up Listen mode, this is a good area to test out. You can see people across the open square, and through all the broken windows. You can stalk your enemies, figuring out where they're going, then intercept them. It's fucking great.

In stealth games, a third person perspective definitely seems to work better than first person. You can see over cover or around corners, because of the detached camera. First person requires some weird shit, like allowing the player to lean around corners while somehow remaining invisible. The third person perspective, while also unreal, feels more natural to me overall.

I'm amazed how well I'm doing without guns. I really love the hunting rifle, and this is a perfect place for it. You can use its zoom to pop a guy from a distance, then go hide. Rinse, and repeat. But now, my hunting rifle is my fist. And my scope is... also my fist.

Whoop, they caught me. I take a hit from a piece of wood, but that's acceptable. Then I hear a guy say "Fire in the hole!" What the fuck does that mean? Suddenly I catch fire from a molotov explosion. I should have guessed that's what that means.

Trying To Die

By now I've realized that manually restarting an encounter will erase my mid-battle checkpoint. So I opt to let myself die. It doesn't seem like you can die from fall damage, 'cause I'm pretty weak, but a fall from the second floor doesn't get me.

Waiting to be killed feels really weird. I'm almost dead, so I go stand right in the middle of the arena. Somehow, it takes ages for someone to find me and put me out of my

misery. To be fair, I guess none of the enemies would really expect me to just stand out in the open.

Resurrection! The scenario has reset to before I was initially spotted. It must be killing Ellie, sitting up there with her sights trained on some jerk's head, but not being allowed to pull the trigger. Luckily, I get seen pretty quickly, so she doesn't have to resist firing for too long.

I'm hiding in the second floor building, in the corner, which is a somewhat lame thing to do. I'm just waiting for people to jump through the windows, so I can choke 'em. It's more effective than direct confrontation, but not as good as stalking individual bad guys. I'm not sure why I'm doing it, actually. I'm just feeling kinda wussy.

A dude with a club jumps through the window, and I tense up, getting ready to strike. Then a molotov comes sailing from I-don't-know-where-the-fuck, through the far window and all the way across the room, exploding only a little away from me. That's awesome, I've never seen that before.

I decide I better run away, and I take some fall damage in my haste, 'cause I was kinda freaking the fuck out. This fight is starting to unravel my brain.

In the next encounter, I learn that the enemy's "Whoah!" stumbling-back animation really doesn't mean shit. A dude still manages to punch me right in the face, despite being in a state of stumbling shock. I'm getting fucking tenderized, here.

Still Fightin'

The enemies don't act completely independently; they definitely drift toward the player's general location. If you're at one end of the map, you can assume that nobody will be on the other side. Instead, the enemies will be gathered in your general vicinity. These last few guys are in a real clump. I gotta find a way to get them away from each other.

You can fudge this game's rules of stealth pretty far -- If four guys are walking, all on high alert, and you grab the one in the back and grossly choke him to death, the other three won't notice. Their peripheral vision, and peripheral hearing, is total crap. Though if they're on a second floor, they can see below themselves surprisingly well. Given their normal tunnel-vision, that one always surprises me.

These last few enemies are fucking me so hard. It's taking me so many tries. The enemy dialogue does give away that the game ultimately knows where I am -- Enemies will only say things like "I'm gonna check upstairs" if I happen to be upstairs. But it

somewhat still doesn't feel artificial. I really don't know how Naughty Dog pulled that off.

It looks like you can die from fall damage after all, as I just did. Good to know.

I get grabbed from behind by a guy, and someone else shoots me in the head. I wince -- That's pretty fucking brutal. After all this time, the violence in this game can still get me.

On my next life, I punch a molotov man right through a wall! Boom! This game is bugging out on me a lot more than it did during my other playthroughs. I'm definitely stressing the hand-to-hand mechanic much more than was intended.

Finally Killing These Pricks

Ultimately, I take two points of damage: One from falling, and one from getting punched in the head. But I decide to accept it and move on. I really like that battle, it's a lot of fun, but to do it perfectly would take way too many tries. I'm gonna accept my battering and move on.

I have two health points left. Hopefully that's low enough for Ellie to scrounge me up a health pack before I get to Ish's sewers. Or maybe my life bar will reset when I wake up on the beach.

In the post-battle cutscene, Joel gives Ellie her own pistol. It's a nice moment. He trusts her with a gun, which in Texas symbology, means he trusts her as a person. They're a team now. A partnership.

But Joel is definitely still the head honcho. He doesn't give Ellie one of his nice, well-maintained guns. Instead, he takes a random gun off a corpse. She watches him take the gun right out of this dead jerk's hand, then hand it to her, acting all magnanimous. She could have pulled a gun off any of the corpses they passed. She could have a fucking backpack full of guns by now.

I keep thinking of Far Cry 2, and how any guns you take off enemies are total pieces of shit. They're gonna jam up, and you're gonna die. So thanks, Joel. Get your head out of the Far Cry 3 clouds. This is the Far Cry 2 reality!

The Annoyingness Of Reality

I know I'm in the minority with this opinion, but I love it when equipment fails in video

games. What if, one time, at some random point, Ellie's gun wouldn't fire? She'd say "Fuck!", and have to take a moment to fix it. I think that would be awesome.

I'd also love to play an Uncharted-style game where the character has a bad knee. You'd be crossing a rope bridge over a huge chasm, and have to go so slowly, because your leg might give out... I think that'd rule.

Power fantasies suck. They're so boring. Surviving through a disempowerment fantasy -- That's what's cool.

Relationship Building

Plowing directly through Pittsburgh does seem a bit contrived, as there must be a less dangerous route. You could probably make an argument for removing this section altogether, if you were some dick who wanted less The Last Of Us, for some reason. But this journey does help build the relationship between Joel and Ellie, even beyond the beats that are presented in the actual story. The literal amount of time spent between the two characters is important.

Most relationships are built on doing mundane tasks together: Buying groceries, watching tv, taking classes, whatever. The everyday bonding activities in this world are more along the lines of hiking and scavenging, but it's the same principle. Movies and novels have a hard time portraying that kind of downtime without quickly becoming boring. But The Last Of Us does a great job of displaying those smaller moments, and I think they add greatly to the overall experience.

My first time finishing The Last Of Us took something like 15-16 hours -- "It didn't take me that long," I hear you say. Yeah, because you played on Normal. And you know how I feel about that, you little wiener.

Fifteen hours is a pretty long time to spend with a character, and in a movie or novel, the dead spaces would feel interminable. The narrative needs to be addressed more or less constantly; it becomes exasperating to watch characters have small interactions, or even to simply walk places.

But a video game can get away with expressing these small moments, because the player remains actively engaged while they unfold. And during that downtime, the player's mind can draw connections between the characters, or ponder the overall situation; the time spent can add greatly to an overall sense of immersion.

Maintaining that kind of long-term, low-level storytelling is obviously not easy -- See

my opinion of 2013's Tomb Raider as an example of a game that utterly failed to do the same. But Naughty Dog's work seems like a strong step forward, and a great example of how video games can forge a unique identity among the storytelling mediums.

The length of a video game is generally well outside the length of a movie, and a season of television would never focus as exclusively on just two characters as a game like The Last Of Us does. Cutscenes in games may be reminiscent of movies, and the written sections of games may be reminiscent of novels. But the ability to spend hours of time with a character, to observe their exciting times as well as their mundane times, while remaining engaged by both -- That's something that I think only a video game can really accomplish.

Granted, there are four-hour long movies, and crushingly naturalistic books. Those things exist, but they aren't good. They're boring; they're stunts. They're "art films", or "literary novels". They're not playing to the true strengths of their medium.

Some people claim to enjoy artsy, mind-numbing shit. But if we're being honest, they're really just trying to seem smart, by championing things that most people find tedious. I really don't think the ability to stare at something for a long period of time is at all synonymous with being intelligent. It's probably more synonymous with being dropped on your head as a child.

As things stand, most video games are obviously pretty shitty. But after so many years of being on the bottom of the artistic scrap-heap, I think the potential of video games is starting to emerge. For long-form character studies, I think video games may honestly be the best medium for the job. Video games can tuck that medicine right into the apple sauce -- Fifteen hours of behavioral character building can happen in a video game without feeling at all ponderous. That's pretty amazing.

Now, where were we? I believe our heroes were about to face off against some manner of kill-dozer. Am I talking about Shakespeare, or a video game? Who can say? They're both so damn artistically legitimate!

Hiding From The Super-Truck

Joel and Ellie duck under a window as some people outside run from the super-truck. The people running get mowed down, and their blood splashes backward, rather than forward. Is that right? I guess if the bullets lodge in their bodies, rather than passing through... I really don't know shit about bullets. If I ever get a chance to shoot someone who's running, I'll keep a keen eye, and write an update.

[*Update about shooting someone who's fleeing will go here. May we pray that this space never gets revised. Amen.*]

The Hunters shoot bullets right into the body of these fleeing people -- Isn't that gonna wreck their clothes? What if one of them has a cool coat? Isn't salvaging their stuff what this is all about? You dumb scavengers. Would it kill you to build a mousetrap-style cage to lower onto them? You've got time, get creative.

It's pretty fucked up to hunt someone down, and to not even get anything out of it. I guess they see it like hunting animals; they wouldn't feel bad about killing some deer. But at least David's group eat the people they catch. These Hunters are just pricks. A real couple of goofballs.

As the Hunters pick over the corpses, one says, "Busy couple of days, huh?" The other replies, "Whatever, man."

Maybe that second guy is still feeling the weight of the situation. He doesn't wanna discuss the nature of their work, right after they've shot some innocent people. I guess that's a good reason not to shoot people: It makes you feel weird.

I notice that my health bar is blinking slightly red. That's gotta mean I'm injured enough for Ellie to potentially find me a health pack. Fingers crossed. I can't pick up any health packs myself, you see. 'Cause it's the Super Apocalypse.

We come to a bookstore, across the street from a bombed-out two story building. This was the first area where I noticed how well enemies can see below themselves. "There he is. Crouched behind a car like an idiot. Let's shoot him!"*

*Dialogue paraphrased

As I'm skulking around, Ellie gives me a health pack! Yeah! That's extra handy, because I take a couple more punches during this section, bringing my health bar all the way down to 1/5. I would restart the encounter, but my friends Craig and Matt are both watching, and it would feel lame to restart in front of them. I want to look like I'm a cool Last Of Us master. So I force Joel to limp limply forward.

I'm gonna try to save that health pack for the sewers, so I'll have to suck it up for awhile. We sneak past the super-truck, and have to maneuver through a building and down some alleyways. I've always dealt with this section by running through it in a wild panic, and it has always worked. I'm not sure exactly how the game cued me to start running, it just always seemed like the clear thing to do. I guess the super-truck firing wildly in my direction was probably the main impetus for locomotion.

Unfortunately, with my single health bar, I can't make any mistakes. There's a red glowing border around the screen, and any stray bullet is enough to take me out. The best strategy turns out to be starting a lotta fights that I don't finish. I punch enemies once or twice, then keep running as they try to get their bearings. It takes ten tries, max, and I'm out of there. No problem.

Henry And Sam

We head through a building and climb the fire escape, then creep along the building's outer edge. Wait, hold up! There goes the super-truck! Don't make any noise! DON'T! Whew, it's gone! CLOSE ONE, ELLIE! THAT WAS REAL CLOSE- Sorry, I'm yelling. I YELL SOMETIMES. SUPER-TRUCKS FREAK ME OUT.

The way the super-truck keeps pursuing Joel and Ellie is a little gamey, but maybe these guys really don't have anything else to do. Chasing tourists is their life. There's a little side-story about a woman who escaped an ambush, and the Hunters spent all day tracking her. I guess that makes sense -- If you walk into their spider web, the Hunters have no other concerns besides finding you. They're not gonna just let you leave.

We hop through a window, and Henry punches Joel right in the head! Hey! I'm almost dead, Henry! Watch it!

I really like Henry's actor. It's easy to forget the names of secondary characters in video games, and Henry is certainly one of those. But I always remember Sam, because of the way that Henry introduces him: "This is *Sam*." There's something about his inflection that makes that line stick with me. If only Henry had introduced himself with such panache.

Performance

An actor's talent can be an enormous help in bringing a character to life. How's that for an obvious statement? But, let me shore up my pedestrian observation with an example!

In the whirlwind of dogshit that was the Far Cry 3 storyline, I don't think it's that the writers accidentally nailed it with one character. There wasn't one special Vaas scribe who knew what he was doing, while everyone else struggled not to swallow their own tongue. It was the actor who made that character work. Without Michael Mando, Vaas would have sucked just as much as the rest of Far Cry's cadre of idiots.

Another fine example is Lee from The Walking Dead. I read that the original voice actor

was replaced at the last moment, and it was clearly a good move. Lee was an amazing character, in a game that I think was otherwise very overrated. I could nitpick about pretty much every Walking Dead character, but let's just generalize: Telltale's The Walking Dead was full of melodramatic knob-heads, who continually made hysterical choices, which caused me to wish actively for all of their deaths. But not Lee. Lee was fantastic.

It's possible that Lee was more carefully scripted than the other characters -- He was the main protagonist, after all. But my money rests on the actor. There's a sense of gravitas to Lee which, I think, managed to turn off the critical switch in my head.

The Walking Dead was populated with characters who seemed more like placeholders for how a real person in their situation would act. But I believed in Lee. I liked him, he seemed like a real guy. Right now I'm sitting outside, on a beautiful day, but thinking about Lee's fate is making me feel sad. That's a pretty incredible character. And without Dave Fennoy, it seems likely that Lee would have irked me, the same way the other characters did.

Cheers, Dave, and cheers, Mando. Video game acting is clearly not easy, and you guys did real, real good.

The Naughty Dog Secret

Naughty Dog is very far ahead of the pack (sorry) in regards to character performance. The storytelling in Naughty Dog games seems hugely advanced, and I think a lot of that can be attributed to the performances.

I love the characters in Uncharted games, but I always marvel at how little I remember the plot of those games. I've played Uncharted 2 and 3 a dozen times each, but I would struggle to tell you the finer details of their plots.

In those PS3 Uncharted games, everything the characters say sounds right, and feels right. There's not a lot of meat on the bones of those stories, but that doesn't really matter, because the characters are so compelling, and so well-performed.

If a great performance can do so much to elevate a game's writing, it stands to reason that a poor performance could also bring down a game's writing. Maybe it's not that other games are necessarily so badly written; it could be that the writing falls apart under poor delivery.

Before voice acting became common, I remember being pretty happy with most video

game storylines. Granted, I was a kid, but even back then I was pretty judgmental. When character dialogue was delivered in only text, I could supply the tone and inflection. My mind did a lot of the heavy lifting. Now, a bad performance is inescapable. I can't give a character the benefit of the narrative doubt, when they're actively fumbling right in front of me.

For big studio games, there's no going back. It's not considered acceptable to release a game that doesn't have voiced dialogue. So the only option is to go forward.

Naughty Dog has their actors perform scenes together, like they're in a play. They record audio and motion capture at the same time. I'm sure that what they do is not cheap, and is not easy. But expensive though it may be, there's really no other choice. Clunky line readings, by people isolated in sound booths, are hurting the rest of a team's work. Having a bad performances is literally worse than having no performance at all.

When discussing Uncharted 4, Colin Moriarty noted that Uncharted 2 had been released seven years earlier, yet Naughty Dog was *still* the only company releasing games at such a high level of quality. He had no theory with which to explain the industry's delay, and neither do I. But the situation is clear: It's time for narrative video games to evolve, and one company has already shown how it can be done.

I know it'll take time to catch up, Rest-Of-The-Industry. These are some big shoes to fill. But y'all ain't exactly fumbling in the dark. Someone already took the Sliders machine into an alternate reality, and brought back some of that reality's more-advanced games. The blueprint has been laid; the impossible is clearly possible, because Naughty Dog has pulled off this narrative miracle like, four or five times already.

I wish the guy with the Sliders machine had also brought back some later seasons of Firefly. That woulda been sweet. But, you can't have everything. Maybe Firefly got canceled in every single reality. I bet it did. God -- You truly are a brute.

Following Henry And Sam

Back to the Henry ambush: Joel is really fucking beating on that guy. Then Sam breaks up the fight by pulling a gun. Henry convinces Joel that they're not a threat, by merit of being an adult and kid traveling together. The Hunters are not very forward thinking, and don't keep any kids around. Joel can't argue with that, or chooses not to, which is very adult of him.

Henry's arm is hurt, and he wraps it with a bandage, the same way Joel does when he uses a health kit. That's a nice touch, and helps sell the idea that the health kit system

makes some kind of sense.

We follow Henry and Sam, doing a bit of a walk and talk. Henry and Sam are brothers, who got separated from their group; they're planning to meet up with the others, but those others are probably dead. Yeah, yeah. No offense, Henry, but that's the story of everyone's life.

Third Person

A third-person perspective definitely helps alleviate a lot of immersion-breaking player behavior. For example, when someone is talking to you in Half Life, it's almost impossible not to run and jump all around, because you're bored as shit.

In The Last Of Us, your mobility is reduced, so Joel's movements appear more natural. But you can still manufacture some weird times. While walking to the safehouse, I decide to train my gun on Sam the whole way. I can't shoot him, but pointing a weapon at a kid is still pretty disconcerting. Henry, however, remains nonplussed. He really seems to trust me.

Loadout

During this playthrough, I'll occasionally jump over to a YouTube Let's Play video, in order to check on some detail that I missed. I can't help noticing that those players are carrying *way* more weaponry than I am. My version of Joel is lean and mean, carrying only a shotgun. I never noticed the size of Joel's arsenal before, but by comparison, it seems huge.

The Toy Store

Next up is the toy store, where Sam wants to take a little robot toy, but Henry tells him to leave it. You can see Ellie pick up the robot and put it in her backpack, but only as everyone is leaving. It's a pretty famous easter egg, but I'm sure I would never have discovered it without the internet. As a player, you have to have Joel facing away, while keeping the camera focused on Ellie. It's a pretty weird gameplay situation, and a bit of a tricky maneuver, just to get a little morsel of storytelling. Last Of Us, you're fucking crazy.

Outside we fight some guys, then climb onto a low roof. Two Hunters take posts above us, hiding behind twin air vents. I climb up beside one, circle around, and choke him

out. His friend a few feet away doesn't see me, which is a bit ridiculous. But I reckoned it would work; I've got these enemy vision cones figured out, yo.

Situations like this make me wonder if the stealth game genre will ever really work. Evolved monkeys that we are, humans are a jittery, nervous, extremely observant species. We can somehow tell if someone's watching us from across the street; we look around so habitually that our situational awareness can seem like ESP. There is no way that either of those guys would have missed seeing me. A realistic stealth game, as I've said before, would be a "getting-shot-in-the-face" game. It'd be a nightmare of impossibleness.

Henry's Hideout

We make our way to Henry's hideout, behind a locked door in an office building. Henry stole the key off somebody's corpse, and it's pretty weird to be holed up so close to the enemy. I guess there's no easy way to replicate keys anymore, so Henry probably has the only set. Surely someone will take a fire axe to the door eventually, but to hide out for a couple of days... I guess it's alright. Maybe. It still seems pretty close to danger. You better not be messing with me, Henry! I've got my gun trained on Sam's head! I can sleep like this if I have to!

Ellie tells Sam that she's fourteen, and he says he is too. The way Henry laughs makes me think Sam is closer to twelve. Like, he's really reaching by claiming fourteen. The Last Of Us wiki says that Sam is thirteen, but what do they know.

Henry says he's searching for the Fireflies, and Joel says, "You don't know where they are, but you're just gonna drag [Sam] across the country to find them?" This is expressly why Joel doesn't like the Fireflies -- They spread a sense of hope that's dangerous, and which gets people killed. The Fireflies pulled Tommy away, with empty claims of hope; now, years later and thousands of miles away, their message is still sowing chaos in people's lives. The Fireflies are causing people to strive for a miracle that ain't gonna come, rather than focusing on practical, survival concerns.

About Ellie, Henry says, "She doesn't seem bothered by all this." I like that it's seeded into Ellie's character that she's a little crazy. A normal teenager, even one raised in a post-apocalypse, would probably have a harder time with this situation than Ellie does. But Ellie's a weirdo; some of her springs are already loose, which leaves her a little numb to the pressures of this adventure.

The Spotlight Fight

Henry has a plan to escape Pittsburgh, under the cover of darkness, when the guard detail is smaller. I was hoping the little rest we take at Henry's would give me full life, but it doesn't. So I try not to let the gang notice my hobbled limp.

Henry says to Sam, "You stick to me like glue, understand? Like *glue*." Then he does this little nervous gesture with his hands before they head out. This must be a nightmare for Henry. Before this, he and Sam were part of a group; the singular weight of responsibility has only recently fallen on Henry's shoulders. Maybe that's why he's pushing his agenda so hard, insisting on rules like leaving the toy robot behind. Henry is freaked the fuck out.

We come to the spotlight fight, and I'll be honest: I don't really understand the spotlight fight. You sneak over and fuck with the generator, and bad guys come out to investigate. They spread out, and I assumed at that point I could sneak past them, like a puzzle. But it seems like I still need to kill everyone, before the triangle icon will turn green and let me proceed. It's just kind of a strange, overly complex encounter.

But we make it, apparently pretty easily, because I haven't written any notes about it. Cool! Then the returning super-truck freaks out Henry even more, and he turns his back on Joel and Ellie. He leaves us behind to fend for ourselves, as he and Sam run off. That dick!

But I can't really be too mad at Henry. We did just meet, and I bet he's still feeling those bruises from when Joel punched the shit out of him. In the back of his mind, he was probably looking for reasons to ditch us. He surely must have sensed that Joel wasn't a safe guy to have around. So when the opportunity came to split, he took it. I'd be more angry if his betrayal caused our deaths; in that case, I'd haunt Henry's ass for sure. But you got lucky this time, Henry.

Joel and Ellie are also lucky, diving into a garage and slamming the door shut just as the super-truck fires a spray of bullets. How this thin metal door stops those bullets, I have no idea. But really, I've got no business talking about bullets, and what they can and cannot do. If there were an apocalypse, I reckon I'd be more of a crowbar type of guy. Smashy smashy!

We sneak through an abandoned bar, which has the same layout as the bar from the opening of Uncharted 3. Canonically it's not the same place, but it's inclusion is a neat touch. In Uncharted 3, this bar contains a newspaper which mentions the cordyceps virus. This must be where the membrane between the two realities is most thin. DRAKE! CAN YOU HEAR ME, DRAKE? CUTTER IS GONNA FAKE SHOOT

YOU! BUT YOU ALREADY KNOW THAT! OKAY! TALK TO YOU LATER!
YEAH! NO, YOU CAN BORROW IT! OKAY! COOL!

A bad guy hits me in the face with a pipe, and it makes me laugh. It's so brutal looking, and sounds so fucked up. This game's violence still gets me once in awhile.

The guys in the next area have dug in, one patrolling while the other two crouch in wait. I don't have a brick to shake up their pattern, so I think the best bet is to let them see me. That should remix their location a bit. I let one guy spot me, and Ellie fires her first pistol shot! Yeah! I forgot she had that gun. The guy runs away, back into the other room. Haha. What a bitch.

I take the bad guys out pretty easily, but with the last guy I'm right at the threshold of how far away you can stand and still land a punch. Joel kind of slides toward him, so that his fist will connect. It looks weird, but is lucky for me. I was one pixel away from just punching the air.

I always find this next part dumbly confusing. You have to move a trolley out of the way of a chained door, so you can squeeze through the door's opening. But on my first two playthroughs, it totally fucked me up. I thought I needed to use the trolley to climb up to the second floor. The trolley is just there so you can't exit without killing all the enemies, but its inclusion completely threw me off. Twice. So, that's the level of intelligence you're dealing with here, in case you needed a baseline.

Running To The Bridge!

Now it's a crazed run onto the bridge, away from the super-truck! During this chase, there's a small traffic sign that falls over, which I always notice. It looks kinda wimpy, like it doesn't have much weight to it. It's like a physics object that hasn't been imbued with the proper mass. But really, I've got no business talking about traffic signs, and what they can and cannot do.

The bridge is out! The whole middle section is missing, which is something we failed to notice earlier! Oh no! That might explain why the bridge was crossed off, on that sign by the coffee shop. But with no bridge, why are the Hunters guarding the area so closely? It's not a valid point for entering or leaving the city. They shouldn't need all these spotlights and alarms and shit.

Axing The Pitt

I've said this before, but the Pittsburgh section definitely feels less tight than the other parts of the game. On the plus side, I like the characters of Henry and Sam; they're a nice example of what can happen when a co-dependent duo loses one of its members. Pittsburgh itself is also cool, and has a bunch of great moments.

But if you had to axe one section, this'd be it. There are a lot of areas where I can't follow the story's navigational reasoning, and I just have to remind myself that I'm playing a video game. I would hate to see Pittsburgh go, but overall, it does feel like the game isn't quite up to its full speed yet.

I Am Alive

This broken bridge reminds me of the game I Am Alive. I didn't finish that game, because it kinda sucked. But it did have some really great ideas. When climbing, there was a stamina bar which had to be managed. That game contained a bridge just like this, and climbing across it was a pretty harrowing experience.

For most of the game you only had one bullet, if that. You could wave your empty gun at people to intimidate them -- There was a lotta cool stuff going on. But compared to something like The Last Of Us, I mean, no offense... but it was pretty shit. So pour one out for I Am Alive. Too beautiful for this world. That's eulogy-speak for "it was horribly ugly and disfigured". Amen.

All Of Joel's Friends Jump Off A Bridge

Joel asks Ellie, "How many bullets do you have left?" Jesus, Joel; maybe you wouldn't have to rely on Ellie for bullets if you PICKED UP SOME OF YOUR OWN! Who would come all this way without picking up any bullets? Do you want to die? Are your fingers paralyzed or something? Pick up some shit!

(I'm just kidding. I'm proud of you, Joel. Don't pick things up. Besides, if you pick anything up, the Devil will get you. Remember those couple of things you picked up in Boston? The memory still burns, doesn't it? Wash your hands, wash your hands, turn around ten times, say a prayer. Never pick up anything. Never, ever. Then everything will be alright.)

So, with water ahead of us, and enemies behind us, Ellie decides we have to jump in the river. Hey, Ellie -- You know you can't swim, right? Has that come up? On the other

hand, we both must be pretty ripe by now. Falling into a river would probably do us some good. But still, it's- Ah, she jumped.

Joel leaps in after Ellie, and manages to grab her. The current then smashes him back-first into a huge rock, and the impact of him hitting the rock is brutal. You could say... it *rocks*. Sorry.

Lifeguard Henry To The Rescue

Hey Joel -- Does almost drowning give you all your life back? No? Of course it doesn't. Why did I think it would? Thank god I've got that health pack. I'll keep holding on to it if I can, but I think I'll need to break it out soon. We're getting close to Super Sewer Infected Time.

I wish I hadn't taken so much damage getting through Pittsburgh. I just wanted to look cool in front of my friends, which meant I didn't restart many fights. Peer pressure -- Still fucking with me, after all these years...

I also just remembered about the standoff at the end of the sewer, while you're waiting for the final door to open... Fuck. I do have a fair amount of bullets saved up, if I need them. But, god dammit. That part is gonna suck.

Joel's pretty mad at Henry for ditching him. And Joel is a mass-murderer, so that's a bad situation for Henry to be in. However, Henry points out that he saved Joel and Ellie from drowning. It's best not to think too hard about the logistics of the rescue. Did Henry grab them both? How did he even see them? I can see the bridge in the distance behind us; it's not crazy far away, but it still seems like a pretty long way to be dragged down a river while unconscious.

Well, however the rescue worked, I'd say Joel is darn lucky to be alive. Realistically, I don't know that he shoulda made it through this one. So he and Henry agree to an uneasy truce, and Henry says the classic line: "You're gonna be really happy you didn't kill me."

Man, Henry looks filthy. Sam's pretty filthy, too. Maybe they've had it rougher than Joel and Ellie did. And they didn't even get to see the bar from Uncharted 3. So who's jealous now, Henry?

The Beach

You ever read Alex Garland's novel The Beach? It's really good. I feel like the movie is

more of a trailer for the book. And they printed so many copies that at one point, you could order a copy for literally one cent. I've read it a bunch of times, and I can tell you, it'd be a steal at twice the price.

I notice while walking that the camera is pulled in much closer to Joel than it was to Nathan Drake. I have Joel wade into the water as far as he can go, but I can't see his pants getting realistically wet. In Uncharted 1, that was everybody's favorite party trick: Literally watching a man's pants dry.

Hey, a little crab is scurrying across the beach! Cool.

Ellie points out a boat in the distance. I think she makes a point of it mainly so players won't miss the beginning of Ish's story. Ish is a man who went to sea during the outbreak, kind of like they do at the end of Day Of The Dead. Eventually, Ish could stay at sea no longer, so he brought his boat to shore, and tried to establish a community in the sewers.

Ish's story is really well told, and he finds a place in my heart for writing the phrase, "If you happen to find my skeleton, please don't step on my skull. Thanks." There aren't a lotta jesters in the apocalypse, so I appreciate Ish's dedication to cracking wise. He won't be laughing soon, when all the children in his community are dead. But for now: Funny guy!

Speaking of jesters, Ellie asks if everyone had boats in the old world. Joel says he had a sixty foot yacht. I guess it's a good sign that Joel can go from murderous rage at Henry, to cracking jokes a few minutes later. But it may also be a signifier of a dangerously fractured personality. Well, whatever. I'll keep an eye on it. I'm sure it's fine.

At a nearby sewer drain gate, Sam says, "Hey Ellie! I think we found something!" I think it's telling that Sam doesn't wanna talk to Joel. "Uh, Mr. Murderer, sir? We, uh, we found a drain gate thing. Please don't choke me to death. Th-thank you."

We open the grate, seeing a huge, dark sewer, and decide to head right in. Is that really what a person would do? I guess so, 'cause we're doing it.

The Sewers

1.2/5 health
4 9mm bullets
7 revolver bullets
6 shotgun shells
1 health kit
1 nail bomb

The sewers are almost a *Gone Home*-type of section. Everything we learn about Ish's group is based on the environment they've left behind. Just as *Gone Home*'s characters seemed richer for us having never met them, so it goes with Ish and his crew.

Am I getting better at writing, by the way? It seems like I'm getting pretty sweet at it. More flowery is more powery. Take that advice, kids.

(PS: Don't take that advice.)

The sewers are surprisingly well lit. I'm not really sure how that's happening. Most of the game allows its dark areas to get pretty dark, so the light in here seems a little unusual.

At the first fork, Henry and Sam go left, and we go right. Every time I play, this fork seems awkward. You can see Henry and Sam just standing at their end, waiting stiffly until you come to them. I guess they're placed there so it's obvious where to rendezvous with them. But they seem kind of frozen, and in a Naughty Dog game, it's unusual for a seam to remain so un-hidden. They could be waiting around the corner, and we wouldn't see them just hanging out. It's a nit-pick, but why the hell else am I writing this book? "A guy plays *The Last Of Us* and notices stuff." That's how I would like the Library of Congress to list this book.

In a side-room, there's a cork-board with multiple copies of the same two news stories. It's a little more noticeable here than the repeating books were earlier in the game. But to be fair, like with those books, I never noticed the repetition until I was deliberately looking for it.

Hey, I just realized -- Did I get some life back? My health was making the screen borders throb red before, and now it's not. Maybe the game healthed me up a bit, just to get rid of the imminent-death-throb.

There's a height marker on one of the walls. Joel is a little over six feet, and Ellie is a little over five.

The companion characters do a pretty good job of shining their flashlights at things that make sense for them to be looking at. The amount of detail in this game is bananas. It's like Undertale -- If you can think of some weird detail, the game probably thought of it as well. I like that. No half-assing! I *respect* it.

There's a side-room with a couple of Clickers in it, which I sneak through. The room has a note from Ish, saying that he met some people with kids. He's gonna invite them into his sewer-encampment. It's creepy to think that the Clickers standing near me are probably some of those same people.

I do wonder what ultimately happened to Ish. People were wondering if the DLC would be about him, and it seemed unlikely. Ish is a fairly obscure character. But it woulda been cool to see where he ended up. Ish's willingness to accept that he should be dead leads to a lot of his levity, and that comedy-fatalism makes him a pretty compelling guy. He seems like a pretty decent dude, but his attempts to build a community ultimately led to a lot of people getting killed. You could say that his ish got messed up. Sorry again.

On the way out of the room, one of the Clickers bites me. But I'm not gonna take any of the supplies anyway, so on the re-load, I avoid that room altogether.

After completing a little puzzle, Joel needs Henry to pull him out of the water. But if you let Henry, Sam and Ellie walk all the way down the hall, and then jump back in the water, Henry will teleport over to help Joel climb back out. You heard it here first: Henry is a teleporter! Add it to his wiki! What story implications does this have? None, really. It's just a cool thing that he can do. I think it's neat that he doesn't feel the need to brag about it. Henry is quietly secure about his teleportation.

Ish's Stronghold

We head into Ish's stronghold proper. This is my first chance to see a Shorty, and to not pick it up. Instead, I watch it coldly as I walk by. No one else picks it up, either. Maybe my steely intensity intimidates them. They assume that I know what I'm doing, instead of seeing the truth, which is that I'm crazy.

I somehow didn't see Ellie and Sam play soccer until my third playthrough. It's weird that I managed to miss it twice, but it was cool to keep seeing new things on later playthroughs. So it was kinda neat to have initially missed it.

There's an encounter with some Infected coming up. Man, I hate fighting the Infected. All those Hunter battles have made me soft. And I'm mostly dead, so it's extra important that I don't take damage.

Whew! Got 'em! How's that for a riveting battle log? It feels weird to wait for NPCs to kill Clickers, but lord knows I ain't getting near 'em. Pull your weight, NPCs!

Joel says that since we saw Clickers, that means these people have been infected for awhile. Let's hope there aren't any more of them, he says. Well, there are more of them. There are a shit-ton more of them. They must have had quite a sizable community down here. And now it's become nothing but a mangle of monsterish murderers. Man.

If memory serves, Ish's group all fell apart because someone didn't lock a door. Is that right? That seems kinda lame. There was no big catastrophe, it was just someone being dumb. Double check the door, Peter! How hard is that? Gosh!

Ish's community has a pretty serious rain catching operation, with lots of water-collection barrels. There's a big hole in the ceiling, and I spot a supermarket, which the group likely raided to help them get established. It's a pretty well designed scenario, except for the part where everybody lived in a sewer. That seems pretty drastic, even during an apocalypse.

There's probably still water in these barrels. It woulda been nice of Joel to mention the water-room to the others, in case anybody wanted to wash their face, or grab a drink. But then, it woulda been cool if Joel did a lot of things. The fact of the matter is, Joel's not a very cool guy.

Posted all around are what may be considered an over-abundance of rule listings. It seems like misplaced effort, given that Rodney or whoever couldn't even remember to lock a goddamn door. Each rule listing is different, which belies a certain desperation: The rules seem to insist that this is a contained and sustainable situation. Don't worry, everybody! This sewer is all under control! Just follow all these rules, and we'll be fine! Did I write down "Lock the door"? Of course I didn't! That doesn't need to be a rule! Everyone knows to do that! Jimmy-No-Lock -- You're on locking duty tonight! Make sure to lock up! Night!

There's a kid's drawing of Ish and a guy named Danny, with the words "our protectors". The story of the Pittsburgh Hunters was fairly muddled, trying to tell too big a story through limited means. But the Ish story is the opposite -- There aren't many actual notes to read, but the overall story seems very clear.

The Classroom

The classroom is probably the creepiest part of this whole game. The words "They didn't suffer" are written on the ground, near a sheet covering three kid-sized bodies, with an

adult body nearby.

Games like Bioshock and Half Life 2 have used this type of environmental storytelling before; the layout of a room will often tell the story of what happened there. But those games aren't known for their downtime, so none of their environmental storytelling is as quiet as this. Here, there's no sound, and no music. The Last Of Us has trained the player to know that during these exploratory sections, they are in no imminent danger. They can just look around, and soak it in.

A nearby note explains that everyone else in the community was dead, and this one guy, Kyle, was trapped in the classroom with the kids. There were Infected outside the door, and no other way to escape. That's a fucking terrifying way to go. Would I have had the balls to kill these kids? I guess it's better than letting them starve. A lot of people got a pretty raw deal in The Last Of Us, but I think Kyle and these kids may have had it the worst.

Kyle's pretty much a straight up skeleton, so it really must have been awhile since this all went down. This area is pretty well sealed -- Shouldn't Kyle have some skin on him? Do stray corpses mummify? Beats me. Who am I to say what human skin can and cannot do, etc.

There's a bottle of pills next to Kyle's skeletal hand, suggesting it was a pill suicide. But Joel can pick up those very same pills, and use them to boost his stats. I guess pills affect everyone differently. I wonder if Joel also checks old corpses for gum, or breathe mints? Waste not, want not, corpsey.

Melodrama

People say The Last Of Us is bleak, and it sure is. But I think it earns its bleakness, much more than the average depression-fest does. I watched my friend Craig play some Beyond: Two Souls, and in one section, a bunch of downtrodden homeless folk were sitting around in the snow. One of them talked about how her boyfriend beat her, and about how she was fixin' to give birth in a month, but the baby hadn't kicked in days...

It's like, jesus christ, game. Come on. That's way too depressing. And it's mostly disconnected from any larger themes of the story -- It's just a depressing little tale, included for no particular reason.

Don't misunderstand, I like downbeat shit. *Memento Mori*, and all of that. But don't just throw some tragedy in there for the sake of it. The depressing shit has gotta have some greater meaning, or greater connection to the human experience. Otherwise, it just gets

exasperating. You can't just kick an audience in the teeth -- You've gotta earn those kicks.

Ish's Living Quarters

A trap gets set off, which slams down a huge security door. Joel and Sam get stranded on one side, with Henry and Ellie on the other. Ellie starts talking to Sam through the gate -- They've pretty much cut the adults out of their dynamic. But then a fuckton of Clickers show up to run Henry and Ellie off! Oh no!

I'm not really sure where all those Clickers came from. There's one open vent, so I guess they were all hanging out up there, drooling on themselves and voiding their bowels and whatnot. That's something zombie fiction never really tackles: Do all zombies have pee and poop in their pants? There must be at least a bit. Do you smell that? The stench of death...

Since Joel is safe on his side of the barrier, he probably should have made some noise, to draw the poopy Clickers toward him. But as we've discussed, Joel is a bit of a dick. And the nearby Infected on Joel's side might have been alerted, so from a gameplay standpoint, I guess I'm glad he stayed quiet. Good call on being a dick, Joel. Keep that up.

The living-quarters section of Ish's hideout is my least favorite part of this whole game. The place itself is great, if you can manage to clear it out and take a look around. But on the higher difficulties, there's not much chance of doing that. With my skeleton arsenal, I'm especially hopeless. If there are any Clickers in there, I can't take them out without using up my tiny ammo cache.

These Infected are really erratic and crazy, and if you make it to the end while any of them are too close to you, you won't be able to activate the ladder to escape. The first time I played on Survivor difficulty, even while picking up everything I could, I had a really hard time here. I had to plan out every shot, and not make any mistakes. Fuck, I hate this place.

There are a bunch of gears at the start of the area, and it used to be a pain to pick them all up before each attempt. At least now, I can ignore them. They're not even there, man. It's the Super Apocalypse.

The way this area is laid out, it looks like there aren't any enemies. But as you move in, it turns out there are a crap ton of Infected, hanging out behind everything. Are these Runners, or Stalkers? I still don't know the difference, and apparently never will. But whatever they are, I got pretty good at fighting these erratic-types in the generator room

of the hotel. If you run toward them, it's not too hard to land the first punch. But there's no way I can fight them all. And it turns out there are indeed a couple of Clickers in the mix. I don't think Sam has a weapon, so those Clickers ain't gonna be dying.

Once you make any of the Infected upset, the Clickers come straight for you. You can use that to draw them away from the end of the level -- I even manage to get the kid boosted up once, but then I get killed before Joel can get up the ladder. Man, this is brutal. Do I break out the ammo? I've got another big fight right after this. Super Apocalypse! Why are you always fucking me?!

My thoughts return to the day when I had the idea for this playthrough. I was at a coffee shop on Roncesvalles Avenue, in Toronto. It seemed like such a crazy thing to do. I was so excited to try it.

But now, this is my hell. I enter a fugue state, and try the encounter over and over again. Eventually I get through, and it's mainly just luck. I do a crazy kamikaze run into the little side area to the left, and punch that Infected a couple of times. Then I move to a second Infected and give him a quick pop. A Clicker turns the corner, swinging her arms, so I turn and run away. The remaining Infected are perfectly scrambled, allowing me to run to the end of the level. I boost the kid up, and somehow there's nobody on my tail. I take no damage, and only had to try about ten or twelve times. That's not too shabby. I'll take it! I really do hate that part, though.

Joel hasn't warmed to Sam. Before boosting Sam up to get the ladder, he just says, "Move it." But it's probably best not to get attached. Maybe Sam will live to a ripe old age, and he and Joel will become great friends. Or, maybe Sam will die tomorrow. Really, it could go either way.

180 Degree Turn

I've been experimenting a bit with pressing down+X to do the 180 degree turn. It's not bad, but it's a little disorienting. I can see why I kept forgetting about it on other playthroughs -- If you don't have time to swing the camera around manually, you're probably dead anyway. Turning around in first person games seems like more of a problem; in third person, it doesn't take that long. So it's a cool option, but I think you're mostly fine without it.

Scoping Out Ish's Digs

I reload the game and switch to Easy, just so I can clear out the living area and take a

look around. It's still kinda tricky to do, because these Infected are such crazy assholes. It sure feels good to kill 'em. Motherfuckers.

There's a note on the wall near the entrance which is really hard to read, but seems to be instructions for feeding chickens. There's a reference to a pig, also. Did Ish's group have chickens and pigs? Good on you! You shoulda taught the chickens to lock doors, and you woulda been all set.

They also have rules for the shower -- Five seconds to lather up, then ten seconds to rinse off. That ain't too bad. Showers! Nice! There's even a corpse in a shower. That's how much that guy loved the shower. He wanted to die in it. I'm down with that.

Joel seems a lot nicer once all the Infected are dead. He even tells Sam that he did a good job. Much less terse. Murder must chill ol' Joel out. His anti-drug is monster killin' and gut spillin'. I feel him, 'cause I'm the same way.

Escaping Ish's Stronghold

We meet up with Henry & Ellie, and run from some Infected, toward our last stand. Maybe this part won't be as brutal as I think, because I did notice on my third playthrough that the kids open the escape door a lot more quickly than I initially thought they did.

But it's still gonna be rough, and I try to plan out how many supplies I should use. I don't foresee needing much of anything for Tommy's Dam. So, fuck it. I'll use 'em all if I have to. But of course, I'm gonna try to stay frugal.

The standoff begins, and I run around like a maniac, taking wild swings at enemies, and turning around just in time to avoid any Clickers. Next thing I know, two Clickers are all that's left. I huddle up against the door, and wait to see if Henry will take them out. Then the kids pop the door behind me.

Whaa..? What the? I did it in one try? Holy shit! I took one small graze from an Infected, so I'm down to 1 health bar, and the screen is throbbing red around the edges again. But, man. If you don't mind me saying, I've got this game kinda throttled. I've beat its corpse into pieces.

It's kinda ridiculous that this Super-Apocalypse playthrough has even come this far. Joel is literally punching his way across America. This also confirms that the best strategy in this game is to run. When in doubt, run the fuck around. Run like crazy. Throw a punch here and there, and eventually everything will work out.

Is it possible that this game is fudging things even more than I realize? Characters definitely give you ammo and health packs when you're low on supplies -- Could the game see that I have so little stuff, and decided to make the sewer standoff easier? It seems unlikely, but I really thought that fight was longer. I guess I'm just thinking back to my first time, when I thought I had to kill everyone. The door was probably open for ages, before I finally sloughed off my bloodlust for long enough to notice.

Being Stupid Good At Games

When I was a kid, I could beat Tailspin on the TurboGrafx without getting hit. Wow, right? But I'm just saying. I could.

In The Suburbs I

I learned to drive... On the outside of Ish's stronghold is a painted note: "Warning, Infected inside. Do not open." Imagine having to write that, knowing that a lot of those Infected are the remnants of your group. Pretty sad, dad.

The red throbbing has disappeared from my screen edges. Maybe I didn't get any life back earlier; maybe the game just tones down the throb once you're outside of combat.

The four of us start exploring some suburban houses, and this little community is really well laid out. All of the environments in The Last Of Us are essentially straight lines -- The sniper section right after this, for example. There's no reason why you'd have to bear down on that sniper. In reality, you'd get the fuck out of there. You'd never be trapped in a corridor-shaped neighborhood.

But going down this hill feels pretty good. Weaving through the houses feels realistic. It's cool to see a neighborhood once all of its barriers are gone -- You can be in one house, then be in the house across the street, and it's all part of one big environment. The social boundaries are gone, as well as many of the doors and walls.

Ellie mentions that while she was with Henry, she took out a couple of Infected by herself. She's growing up so fast, that kid.

In one of the houses, Ellie and Sam sit on a couch and have a little chat. They talk about how Ellie met Joel; moments of people interacting like that are so cool. Reading early descriptions of Bioshock: Infinite, that was exactly what I had hoped for: Interludes of people just hanging out. Like the early parts of Sylenius Mysterium. And if you get that reference, then we should talk about Braminar, 'cause you're one hardcore motherfucker.

There's a surprisingly undamaged set of coats in this house. I wouldn't mention it, except that the same extra-bright coat set is also in the house down the street. They must have been popular that season. From the Fall Collection. Like, the fall of civilization. Yeah, you get it.

We find a note from Kyle, about how Ish had asked Kyle's group if they wanted to join him. Kyle, you'll recall, was the guy who died in the classroom with the kids. It's surprising how little info there is about Ish and his gang, since they feel so fully formed. But it's really only a handful of notes.

I guess this is where the power of video games come in. The collection of notes, as a little story, works okay. But being able to walk through Ish's hideout, and see the remains of it -- That's what makes the story really come to life. But without the notes, the environment wouldn't be as vivid as it is. Video games really are a convergence of all media, and when it all works, it's pretty amazing.

Narrative Minimalism

I like the idea that less can be more, in regards to storytelling. So, come! Join me in a quick sojourn, into a barely-related discussion! Then we'll get right back to The Last Of Us!

I like looking to the recent past for examples of how stories can be told succinctly. I often have this notion with movies -- In the Eighties, popular movies were usually about ninety minutes long. Nowadays, movies are much, much longer, and I would argue that extra length is to their detriment.

As an example, take Back To The Future. Would that film have been better if it were twenty minutes longer? Hell nah. What about Ghostbusters? License To Drive? Any random movie? Nah, nah and nah. With any Eighties classic, extra length would only bog them down.

A similar exercise can be performed with video games. A good example is Eric Chahi's Another World. That game is a near-miracle: In the early Nineties, it succeeded in having a sense of cohesion and grace that indie games of today still strive to achieve. Its storytelling was minimalist, yet remains clear and timeless.

Now, imagine if Another World had included text terminals. What if the player could stop, and read entries about the alien world they had been transported to? Maybe there could be a diary, from a previous adventurer, which could elaborate on the experience of being stranded in an alien world.

These are common storytelling techniques in modern video games, and none of them would have made *Another World* better. In fact, they would certainly have made the experience less memorable, and less enduring.

As a second example, take *Super Metroid*. It was released a little after *Another World*, and shares a similar sense of timelessness. But imagine if *Super Metroid* had included text terminals. Imagine if it had included cutscenes, involving voiced characters. It's easy to envision, because that's basically what happened in later *Metroid* games. When asked if *Metroid: Other M* is better than *Super Metroid*, 10 out of 10 people say, "Get the fuck out of here, and don't ever come back here ever again."

Video games commonly include such narrative ornamentation. Yet, as the decades pass, it becomes increasingly clear that video games and traditional narrative techniques usually make poor bedfellows.

The Last Of Us manages to bridge this gap, because it draws from many different storytelling wells, and strives to interweave them wherever possible. But using traditional narrative techniques to tell stories in video games is something that has to be done with extreme care. It can't be included perfunctorily. Doing so is the equivalent of putting text terminals in *Another World*. Rather than being additive, it subtracts from the overall experience.

And you know who wants to do that? The *Devil*.

The Devil.

In The Suburbs II

Written on the side of one house is: "I HAVE A GUN! U LOOT, I SHOOT! Will shoot to kill!" Bill mentioned something similar, about how he changed his signs to make it clear that he can defend himself. I'm not sure if that's the best idea. An aggressive sign makes it obvious that you're not only there, but that you have supplies that would be worth stealing.

I think having an obscure attic to hide in, and staying nice and quiet, might be a better play. Don't let anyone know you're around. That's what I'd do. I would weasel, I admit it. Even when merely fantasizing about the apocalypse, I know my place.

Henry mentions that a lot of this aggressive signage is from the first few months after the outbreak, when people were especially scared and freaked out. There are also weird symbols on the houses, a cross design with writing in it. But I don't know what they

mean. Aliens put them there, probably.

Henry mentions that he was five when the virus hit. So he's twenty-five now. Sam is twelve (or thirteen), which is a thirteen year age difference. If Sam is Henry's biological brother, that means at least one, and maybe both of Henry's parents lived well into the apocalypse. Though they may not necessarily be actual brothers, it could be that Henry only helped raise Sam. But some bonds are deeper than biology. Right, Joel? Yeah, you'll find out about that, you crazy old bastard.

Pre And Post Apocalyptic

Most of the Hunters we've been fighting are around Henry's age, maybe a little older. They were just kids when everything was falling apart. Living through an apocalypse probably gives you a certain self-license to behave savagely. Everything's gone, so who cares what I do?

But if you grew up in the post-fucked world, things might not seem as bad. This would just be how the world is. If the cordyceps doesn't wipe everyone out, there's no reason a new society can't be formed out of this. That would be a cool idea for a sequel -- To go another twenty years into the future, and see how things are shaping up.

Maybe the cordyceps does kill everyone, so the characters would all be Infected. The story could be told wordlessly, and focus on the small glimmers of humanity that remain in those creatures. I started writing that as a preposterous joke idea, but it does sound kinda cool.

There's a message on a wall that reads, "Don't drink Ed's tea! It has the virus!" Can the cordyceps infection survive outside of a host? Can it survive in tea? That message has gotta be the product of some ill-informed hysteria. Get it together, guys. Ed's not a bad guy. He's trying to give you tea!

Here's an idea for my all-cordyceps version of Last Of Us 2: There's an Infected who tries to make tea, but doesn't really remember how. He just puts twigs and stuff in cups of water. All of the other Infected ignore him, but one day, another Infected raises the cup to her mouth and pantomimes taking a sip. Classic meet-cute!

Except she wouldn't be able to tell it was a cup, because she has no eyes. None of this would work. You know what, cancel development. This idea is no good.

Exploring The Neighborhood

Joel's holding an arm to his chest, because he's so injured. But I still refuse to use that health pack. You just gotta make it past the sniper, Joel. After that, the game will heal you right up. So walk it off, softy.

There's a workbench in a garage that has a light on, because the generic workbench model is designed with its light on. But this one should really have its light off. Having the light on led my friend Matt to think that people were nearby, which is a fair assumption to make. That light being on becomes an unintentional red herring.

There are a couple of dogs playing near an ice cream truck. At first, I was worried about those dogs. As long as you don't approach them, they just keep running and running. I had flashbacks to old adventure games, where the dogs would tear me asunder. Reload, Restart, Quit. I'd have to find the t-bone steak, and mix it with the sleeping flower, or whatever. But instead, as you approach, the dogs just run away! Easiest puzzle ever!

I love how Ellie doesn't recognize what an ice cream truck is. There are plenty of "what is this?" moments in apocalypse fiction, but no symbol of the decadent past is more ridiculous than an ice cream truck. It's a truck that drives around, delivering ice cream; it's fucking absurd. I like it especially because ice cream trucks weren't some flash-in-the-pan fad. They were a part of society for decades. Things weren't amazing just for a little bit, Ellie. They were jaw-droppingly great, for like a hundred years. We were big-time taking this stuff for granted.

I could never find one of the upgrade tool kits, but there it is! It's in the back of a pickup truck. But of course, I don't pick it up. My tinkering and upgrading days are over. As over as ice cream that comes from trucks. Or ice cream itself. Or, trucks.

Grounded Mode Update!

While house-sitting for my friend Craig, I got to play some more of Grounded Mode on his PS4. This time, the toolkit wasn't in the truck, because I'd picked it up earlier. So that wasn't the mythical missing toolkit -- They just move those shits around if you miss them.

Naughty Dog, you really do have our backs. You put missed toolkits and guns in our path, in a way that doesn't make us feel stupid about having missed them. You are truly too kind.

Though this does beg the question: Where the fuck is that last toolkit I keep missing? I

guess I could look it up. But sometimes, the mystery is more valuable than the answer. You feel me? That's true about Big Foot, and it's true about toolkits. Life is like a missing toolkit. You, uh, you can't use its tools... until you find... that toolkit. Think about it.

The Dart House

The final house in this section has a Halican Drops poster, which is the band that Joel's daughter had on her t-shirt. I have no idea what "halican" means. Google seems to think it's just a family name. I wonder if they rocked, or sucked? They're the last popular band the world ever had, I sure hope they rocked.

Update! According to the Last Of Us director's commentary, "Halican Drops" was the name Neil Druckmann's daughter gave to one of her dolls. The jury is still out as to whether they rocked or sucked.

I just thought of what I'd do if I found myself in a post-apocalyptic world: I'd raid old record stores, and review all the old records! I'd write a zine about it. Then, I'd get my head blown off by some raider. Yeah!

This last house is staged really well. The kids are in the living room, with Henry leaning against the wall. Joel goes upstairs, and finds a safe to open. That takes a little time, so when he comes down, the kids are playing darts. It's a smooth way to have that happen.

Then Joel has a try, and he sure sucks dick at darts. That's weird, since he's such an amazing shot with bricks and bottles. In this playthrough it makes a bit more sense, since I ain't thrown shit. But seriously, he doesn't even hit the dart board. It's ridiculous.

There's a note from a dad, who had to leave his kids while he went out to look for supplies. He left a daughter home with her little brother, telling her to conserve bullets, and to use her size to her advantage in order to escape looters. If he's not back in a week, they should go to the Pittsburgh Quarantine Zone. What a nightmare situation. For him to have even put his kids in that position, things must have been really fucking bad. This is a hail mary, a desperate, weird plan. So, let's assume that everyone died.

Before the apocalypse, I bet this was a nice neighborhood. These houses are gorgeous. I don't send Ellie up into the attic for the training manual, since I can't pick things up or read. On my first playthrough, sending her up there seemed a little dangerous. What if there was an Infected up there? Didn't Joel play The Walking Dead? He had a PS3 at home, and if there are two things he shoulda learned from that game, they're 1) Don't send kids up into zombie attics! And 2) Don't cut your own arm off. It's gross, and it

probably won't help anyway.

The gang sees a Firefly symbol. Joel explains that his brother in Wyoming knows how to find the Fireflies. He then asks if Henry is in for the journey. I never really caught that before -- Joel has decided to stick with Henry and Sam. That makes their incredibly brutal deaths slightly more of a downer.

Around this time I start thinking: This playthrough is feeling long. I keep pausing to write stuff down, and every fight takes me a million tries. But the second half of this game always passes quickly. And once it's over, I know I'm gonna wish there was more.

The Sniper

We hop down a short wall, and a sniper takes a shot at us! Shit! We can't go back... so, we'll run to the side! Nope! Man, this is one bizarre street layout!

The sniper keeps shouting at us to fuck off. We can't, sir! The city planners are forcing me to sneak all the way to you, and stab your sniper face. So, blame those guys! If it were up to me, I woulda run away!

This sniper really stretches my tolerance for game characters and their talking. He doesn't need to yell something after every shot. It's a rare lack of restraint on Naughty Dog's part.

This is a neat section, though. Having a sniper firing at you changes the rules of the world: It's like playing Hot Lava. You have to always be running across open areas. As long as you're running, the first shot will miss. It's like a courtesy shot. So if you take small dashes from place to place, you'll be safe. But if you move too slowly, or stay in the open for too long, you die. You're standing on lava! Get off the lava!

After I die, the edges of the screen start throbbing red again. Why am I chronicling the minutia of the screen-throb system? I don't know. I am compelled to report.

There's one specific route that seems to be best for traversing this section, which I never figured out. For me, it always ended up as a desperate cluster-fuck. But watching my friend Matt play this section, he figured out a smoother path right away.

The various methods I used to cluster-fuck my way through were: 1) Sneaking along the broken wall on the left, 2) Hiding behind the car in the center, or 3) Sneaking along the side of the house on the right. None of these routes felt very svelte; it always seemed like I was lucking my way into the sniper house at the end.

It turns out, if you head to the far, far right, there's a little passageway that goes underneath a porch. Going through that will bring you close enough to the end of the street that the sniper can't get a bead on you. That was the route my friend Matt used, and seems to be the best method. So I'm gonna try that.

Most of the sniper's dialogue is pretty malicious, but he does sometimes say, "Go back to where you fucking came from!" Aw... He's just as scared as me.

And speaking of being scared, I'm pretty fucking scared. Having so little life is making this section especially brutal. The enemies appear based on which way you decide to go, rather than being placed in specific locations. So enemies sometimes show up pretty suddenly, and nowhere feels safe.

I enter the house on the right, see an enemy, and run upstairs to hide. Even though it can sometimes be frustrating, I really like this section. It's exciting!

So I'm upstairs, hiding in a bathroom, and the enemy is standing at the bottom of the stairs. He's pointing his gun up toward the second floor. If I wait for him to come up here, there could be more guys who come along with him. But I can't run toward a guy who's pointing a gun. That's rule #1, #2, and #3 of The Last Of Us -- Never run at a guy who has a gun.

It looks like the window at the end of the hallway is open. I run past the stairs, and the guy yells, "I see you!" He takes a shot and misses. I climb out the window, and now I'm standing on the first floor roof, in full view of the sniper. There's nothing I can do but jump. Alright. Let's do this, Mr. One Health Point.

I leap down, and just barely survive. I've got a tiny sliver of life left. I clamber into the window of the next house, and run for the back door. This is where the opening under the porch is. I sneak underneath, and notice the guy with the gun coming into the new house, as I slip away.

Fuck, video games are cool. Anyone who complains about the A.I. in The Last Of Us can lick my balls. When set to the higher difficulty levels, that shit seems insanely plausible.

I'm not out of the woods yet. A few guys are milling around the front of the sniper's building. They're in full search mode, but don't seem to be leaving that area. Maybe I can slip down one of the side alleys, and get into the house from the back.

I can't find a good moment, so I just hold my breath and start running. And I make it! Yeah! Fuck everybody!

Grounded Mode Update!

For Grounded Mode, you can ignore everything I just wrote. This section becomes even more of a shit show than usual. I end up going the opposite way, along the left path. I hang back at the midway point, to let the enemies disperse. Then I leap a fence that I didn't realize I could jump, and I run into the house. Taa-daa! Not so bad, except for the dozens of tries that led up to discovering that strategy.

Grounded Mode is not a well-balanced experience. It can be way too hard, and the sniper shoots extremely fast. I would describe it less as exciting, and more as "crushingly brutal".

The Sniper House

Once you're outside the sniper's room, you can swing the camera around and see that, unequivocally, there is no one in there. But when you run in, the sniper jumps you! Ahh! Jesus though, Joel sure does stab the shit out of that guy.

Now Joel takes the sniper perch, and a turret section begins. Turret sections have never been fun for me. I honestly can't think of one game where I've enjoyed this sort of thing. I think it's the lack of creative problem solving that wears me out. Every problem is a nail, you have a hammer, and that's it. Just keep hammering, until all the nails are down.

I'm covering Henry, Sam and Ellie, sniping whatever enemy needs sniping, and the super-truck returns! How did they get that goddamn thing all the way over here? Having the truck return is a nice boss-fight situation, and setting the driver on fire with his own molotov is pretty funny. But come on, I saw those roads -- I couldn't even walk down them, let alone maneuver an armored truck through them. I had to come through a sewer just to get here! Did that truck get airlifted in, or what?

Then some Infected show up, and Sam gets bit, but pretends that he didn't. That's a drag. That kid was alright.

Resting

Even more Infected show up, so we make a hasty exit from the neighborhood. Then everybody holes up for the night at the radio tower, even though it's right next to that huge swarm of Infected. I guess the flimsy fence is enough to put everyone at ease. These are some steely motherfuckers.

Joel tells Henry a story about driving motorcycles cross-country with Tommy. I sure wouldn't drive across a damn continent with my brother. Joel and Tommy musta been close, to agree to a trip that long.

Henry says he doesn't think anyone from his group is gonna show up. Meanwhile, Sam and Ellie have a talk about the afterlife. It's a great example of writing that allllmost goes wrong, but doesn't.

On the surface, it's a little heavy: Sam asks Ellie if she believes in an afterlife. He asks if she thinks people's souls are still trapped in their infected bodies. He even walks over to the window and leans against it, staring out into the night. Ellie gives him the robot toy he wanted from the toy store, and after she leaves, he drops it to the ground. It's some pretty dramariffic stuff. But Naughty Dog does it so well. So goddamn, crazy-silly well. I buy it. I buy it all, hook line and sinker.

The fact that Sam is counting the cans of food, even though he must be freaking out with the knowledge that he won't last long -- That's heart breaking. Maybe he's trying to keep his mind off his bite. Maybe he wants to be sure that everyone else will be okay. I just feel goddamn bad for that kid.

Sam asks Ellie how it is that she never seems scared. That idea has come up before, about Ellie's unusual emotional strength. She's more able to cope with an apocalypse situation than most people would be. When Sam asks her what she's afraid of, she takes a long moment, before finally coming up with "scorpions".

I've met people whose values and fears, or lack thereof, are pretty weird. When I was young, I assumed everyone was basically like me. As I've grown older, I've started to understand just how different people are. It's believable to me that Ellie could be the right kind of damaged to fulfill the needs of a video-game character. Her attitude keeps the story moving, and gives the game a sense of levity -- Things would be a lot less fun if Ellie were more shell-shocked. But while her personality may be shaped by narrative convenience, it's also believable. Some people can just take a lot of pressure.

I love the look on Ellie's face when Sam asks her if she believes in heaven. She takes a moment to formulate a political answer, then tells him that she goes back and forth. But her expression says that she doesn't believe in an afterlife at all.

In video games, I often prefer simpler graphics. Emotional resonance can be easier to feel when an image is more abstract; there's less likelihood of an uncanny-valley effect. But Naughty Dog does not have that problem. These facial expressions are amazing. I feel like I'm looking at a real person.

I wonder if Sam felt ashamed that the last thing people thought about him was that he might want a toy robot. Damn, man. Damn, damn, damn.

Morning

We cut to the next morning, and I'm reminded how great the lighting in this game is. You can always tell what time of day it is, just from the light.

You all know the next scene, so let's just say that Sam is already gone. The cordyceps infection spreads fast, and Henry has no choice but to shoot him.

Henry turning the gun on himself is probably the biggest shock of the game. Sarah's death is sad, but not entirely surprising. I quickly realized that Sarah wasn't the girl on the box, and after that, a small part of my mind was cynically ready for her to die.

Henry and Sam's deaths are like whiplash. Their story ends incredibly suddenly, and the moment after Henry shoots himself, the screen cuts to black. After a moment, we see the "Fall" title. It's our first seasonal transition, and for it to happen right after Henry's death makes it doubly jarring. It's kind of like the ending of Hard Core Logo -- Something crazy happens, and then it's over. There's no time to internalize or digest what just happened.

Fall

5/5 health
4 9mm bullets
7 revolver bullets
6 shotgun shells
1 health pack
1 nail bomb
1 shiv

With the changing season, I get my health restored. I always thought it would be a nice touch here if the game shuffled around Joel's inventory. I noticed immediately that while we had new clothes, and had clearly traveled a long way, all of my crafting supplies and ammo remained identical. I guess it frustrates weinerly gamers when you mess with their virtual shit, but having a different array of stuff in Joel's inventory would help sell the idea that they'd done some traveling.

The one addition this time is that, somehow, I have a shiv. I can't think of a reason to hang on to it, so I'll probably use it to open the next shiv door. There's one coming up, by the dam.

The game doesn't normally give out a shiv, because I distinctly remember being locked out of that shiv door. On a first playthrough, when every item seems desperately important, having to leave a door unopened feels like a real kick in the dick.

Maybe this is Naughty Dog's sneaky way of shoring up my inventory: Instead of giving me a bunch of stuff, they give me one shiv, which will grant me access to a bunch of stuff. Ah, Naughty Dog! You've done it again! You've found a way to help me out, without letting me feel like I'm bad at this game. You're too kind for this cold ol' world.

I love the weather here; it's overcast and rainy, which always makes me feel weirdly good. This game really does display a beautiful world. Out in the woods, away from Infected or Hunters, things really look great.

Up the road, in a car, I find an El Diablo. Was that always here? I thought that gun didn't show up until later. Maybe I always missed it in this location. Or maybe my arsenal is so pathetic that the game wants to be *sure* that I find this thing. If so, then cheers, game! But I'm good!

The Last Of Us doesn't let you walk to your death off random cliffs, which I appreciate. I always thought it was weird how video game characters are willing to mindlessly plummet off things. A little natural self-preservation makes sense. It's like I'm

controlling Joel's brain, but his body is still under the control of his autonomic nervous system. It keeps his heart beating, keeps his eyes blinking, and tenses up his muscles when he's standing next to a sheer cliff.

Cutting Off Your Own Finger In Heavy Rain

My favorite part of Heavy Rain is the scene when you have to cut off your own finger. It made great use of motion controls, by making you pull the controller down in a chopping fashion. But greatest of all is that on your first try, the character won't do it. That's his finger, man! He needs that!

So you have to do a second, more complicated series of maneuvers, to psych yourself up... and then, CHOP! You can say eight hundred bad things about Heavy Rain, and they'd all be true. But that scene is goddamn slick.

The Dam

I find a comic I'd never found before. I'm finding all kinds of shit out here. "Hey, Ellie. Here's one of those comics you like. I found it soaked in water, laying in the mud, over yonder."

"Thanks, Joel."

I come to the shiv door, and use my magical shiv to bust it open. There's a lot of stuff in there, but I'm too pious to pick it up. To Joel's jaundiced eyes, this is just an empty room. "Sorry, Ellie. Room's empty." Man, would she be mad if she came in after me to double-check. If she had any idea of all the stuff I've left behind... But at least I pick up comic books.

Video Games As Toys

We come to the dam, and in order to raise the walkway, I need to spin the left stick counter-clockwise. Hearing the plastic grind against itself, I'm suddenly aware that I'm playing with a toy. Just like the Pogo Bal (sic) I had as a kid, or a Simon, or any other weird crap designed to entertain people.

This is a much fancier and more complicated toy, a toy for a guy in his thirties. But in the end, it's still just a bunch of plastic. It's eventually gonna break and be discarded. Someone will find this Playstation at a yard sale twenty years from now, and wonder if

it still works. That's weird to think about.

Joel Meets Hypothermia

A lot of people have commented that it might have been a good idea for Joel to teach Ellie how to swim. I don't disagree, particularly after that scene at the broken bridge. But at this point, I assume the weather's too cold for swimmin'. And the whole thing's a story conceit, so I'm okay with it. Part of the climactic lead-up to meeting the Fireflies involves Ellie's bad swimming, so it's important enough to maintain, despite its minor annoyingness.

Ellie's non-swimming status now forces Joel to jump in the water, to get a pallet, with which Ellie can float across and operate the bridge. Swimming in this water must be cold as fuck. As a frost-bitten Canadian, I have an acute sense of how Joel should be acting when he meets Tommy: Shivering and nearing hypothermia. He should have at least taken his clothes off before he dove into that water. That fool is gonna die.

Sanity Meter

I know having exhaustion meters, coldness meters, and gun degradation would really mess up this game. But there is a part of me that wants all that stuff. There's a hypothermia mod for Skyrim, and a heat mod for New Vegas. I know this isn't the place for that kinda stuff, but those types of effects in games are really interesting.

Instead of an air meter, maybe Joel could have an all-purpose discomfort meter. After diving into freezing cold water, he could be more sluggish. His aim could be worse, and his dialogue could become more terse. But if he does well in combat, he could feel better. Kind of like the Sanity Meter in Eternal Darkness.

Again, I know this would make things more complicated than they need to be. But if I ever get to design a game, I look forward to driving development to a halt with all of my impractical nonsense.

Five By Five

Ellie puts her hand up for a high-five as Joel crosses the bridge. This is a bonding moment that a lot of people mention, but I decide to deliberately not reciprocate. I'm surprised to find that having Joel ignore Ellie's high-five actually makes the scene feel more natural. Joel must be fucking freezing after swimming to get that pallet. He can't

be in a good mood. The fact that he's keeping his misery to himself is plenty. You can't expect him to give out fucking high-fives.

We find a kid's grave, and Ellie flat out says she wants to talk about what happened with Sam and Henry. Joel stonewalls her, forcefully enough to make it clear that forgetting the past is a real conviction of his. It's not some generalized opinion, or something he just doesn't want to deal with -- He treats it like survival. You simply don't talk about the dead. You don't think about them, you don't consider them. Their influence in your mind can hurt you, and might even kill you. So you don't talk about them, at all.

As frustrating as it would be to deal with someone who's so obstinate, I have respect for Joel's position. I don't live in an apocalypse, and have no survival reason to forget the past. On the contrary, I think about the past a lot. But I don't know what good it does me. Months and months and years after something happened, I'll realize, I'm still thinking about that? It's like having a ghost in your head. It might be better to just pull down a gate, and do what you can to keep that shit cleared out.

So I stand right on the kid's grave, to show Ellie that I'm serious. This grave, right here? The one I'm standing on? We ain't talking about this. Now get outta here, I gotta take a leak.

We pass an old bulldozer. There are so many parts of pre-apocalypse life, just laying all around. That's gotta be one of the worst parts of a relatively recent apocalypse -- You're always seeing reminders of the old society.

Fedra

There are a lot of Fedra signs on the walls of the dam. The government must have been trying to hold on to this facility, before everything fully fell apart.

I assumed Fedra was some American federal institution that I was unfamiliar with, being a humble and hardworking Canadian. But it turns out Fedra was created for The Last Of Us, as a catch-all name for the government agency that was formed to try to hold America together. Through the evidence provided, it seems like Boston may be one of the only major cities Fedra still controls.

It's funny that I only really noticed the Fedra signs at this point in the playthrough; they're probably all over the place. But I just glossed them over as generic government set-dressing. As far as American federal agencies are concerned, I didn't know what I didn't know.

Tommy's Power Plant

Inside a little control-shed is another El Diablo, and I spit on it. This room also has a map. I like how Joel has no problem stealing paperwork. In the power plant, he won't take the schematics when other people are using them. But as soon as everyone is distracted, he'll nab 'em up. What a weird dick.

We decide to cut through said power plant, rather than walk around it, because this is a world where walking around stuff is nigh impossible. But there are people in this plant! Their first impression must be that Joel is a crazy mountain man, traveling with his child-bride. The new nuclear family: One murderer, one teen. All subsequent children are then considered additional brides. This is getting creepy, so I'm gonna stop talking about it.

The group pull guns on our heroes, until Tommy tells them to chill. Hey! Tommy's here! Tommy gives Joel a big hug. They've had a rocky past, but there was a distinct possibility that Tommy and Joel would never see each other again. So in that first moment, it must feel good to be reunited.

Tommy is married to a gun-totin' lady named Maria, who is the leader of this community. They're trying to repair the power plant, which had been supplying power to the nearby town where they live. It seems like a pretty respectable operation they've got going.

We head inside, and pet some horses. Ellie reveals that she's ridden a horse before, which is elaborated on in the American Dreams comic: Ellie and Riley knew a watchmen named Winston, who was tasked with monitoring a disused shopping mall. Winston had a horse, and for a small sum of booze, he'd let you ride it. Good guy, that Winston. Fell off his horse, and died. Thanks a lot, Last Of Us.

Tommy and Joel head off to check on some dam business, and Ellie is slightly reluctant to go with Maria. Maybe the stuff with Henry and Sam freaked Ellie out more than she let on. Or maybe she couldn't help but notice that everyone in the world seems to want to kill her. It's gotta be feeling pretty real by now, that there's no heading back to Boston, and that Joel is really the only support Ellie has.

But she agrees to go with Maria, while Tommy and Joel have a walk-and-talk. Tommy tells Joel that he traveled back to Texas, and visited their old houses. He gives Joel the photograph we saw at the start of the game, of Joel and Sarah after a soccer game.

Man... Seeing your daughter's face for the first time in twenty years, without any particular warning... That's gotta be rough. Joel gives the photo back to Tommy. Take your

ghosts, Tommy. Take 'em! We don't need 'em 'round here! You thoughtful prick!

Tommy says, about his group: "They're good men. This place gives 'em a second chance. It gives us all a second chance." He could be talking big-picture, about how they're rebuilding something similar to the pre-apocalypse civilization. Or, he could be talking on a more personal level, insinuating that these men were hunters and raiders. This community could give them a chance to redeem themselves, from their many murders-past.

It seems likely that at least some of Tommy's men would be reformed Hunters. Tommy himself is one, and in this world, it's almost weirder not to have some murder on your resume. That fact could be good for Joel, when he eventually returns: He won't be the only former-monster among the ranks.

They walk past a woman who's standing watch, and Joel introduces himself as Tommy's brother. She says she knows; word travels fast. From her vantage point, she probably saw Joel leap into the water and grab a pallet. I hope she didn't see him standing on that kid's grave. Even in the apocalypse, people are always watching you. You can't stand on a kid's grave in peace.

Pop-In

Some guys are looking at a schematic on a table (which Joel will later steal), and it's the most obvious example of texture pop-in I've seen so far. I wouldn't have thought twice about how blurry the schematic was, until it suddenly popped into high res. Whoah! I'm freaking out!

In a way, the texture pop-in kinda works: It's as though it took a moment before Joel really started paying attention to what he was looking at. His mind was elsewhere. See? I can justify that. I can justify anything!

Joss Whedon once commented on the lengths that fans would go to, in order to trowel over the inconsistencies in Buffy episodes. Once you've earned the goodwill of an audience, they'll bend over backwards to meet you halfway.

Texture resolution could be a neat conceit for a game: The important parts of a character's life could be in high-resolution, while all their co-workers and random nobodies could be in low-res. The character could be walking through a city full of weird, blurry textures, representing people that they don't give a shit about. And as the protagonist gradually falls out of love with their partner, that person could keep getting blurrier, while the new love-interest comes into sharper and sharper focus. Dude -- That

would be indie-game wankery at its finest.

Repairing The Power Plant

I like that there's an attempt to place crafting items in areas that make sense. A bottle will be lying on a table, or rags will be in a laundry basket. When it works out, it's a nice touch.

Uh oh! Speaking of bottles, there's one on the ground. That means there's gonna be a fight here, Tommy! If there's bricks and bottles lying around, there's gonna be a fight! That's how it always is! If you'd seen the shit I've seen, you'd know that by now!

Joel stops to pet a dog. That's one thing that's great about this story -- The guy who potentially dooms the human race is also a guy who genuinely enjoys petting a dog. He's just a dude. Just a dog-pettin' dude.

Tommy's men get the power plant repaired, and cheer their victory. The Last Of Us is a bleak story, but that level of harshness makes the rays of light seem brighter. Seeing those lights come on -- That's a great moment. It wouldn't mean as much in a happier story. But against a backdrop of things being so fucked up, their success seems pretty amazing.

Tommy And Joel Catch Up

Once the two are alone, Joel tells Tommy about Ellie's immunity. He then tries to convince Tommy to take Ellie the rest of the way to the Fireflies. But Tommy doesn't wanna.

Joel says, "Have Maria get some of your born again friends to do it!" I love that line. To Joel, that's clearly an insult -- The idea that these people are trying to re-establish themselves into a more righteous life is basically a joke. I also love how quickly things devolve between the brothers. The veneer of familial civility is real thin.

Joel's arguments quickly reduce to, "Tommy, I need this." I think Joel's already feeling the ghosts of the past nipping at his heels. He knows that bonding with Ellie is dangerous for his mental state. Of course he didn't high-five Ellie at the dam: He's not in bonding-mode. He's in survival-mode.

Horrible, Nasty Man

The first time I played The Last Of Us, I didn't think too much about the encounter with Tommy. But hearing the brothers argue, about the years they spent together, and the severity of what they'd done to stay alive -- It definitely helps explain Joel's later actions.

Joel mentioned to Ellie that he had been a Hunter, but this is the first time we hear about the depth of his violent past. We don't get specific details, but Tommy says the things they did to survive were not worth it. They did things so bad that Tommy still has nightmares. Deep down, Tommy doesn't even think his own survival is justified.

We also don't know that Joel had any intention of quitting that life. It could be that Tommy leaving was the only thing which spun Joel off, into the somewhat less brutal life of being a smuggler with Tess. But by pretty much any definition, Joel is a villain. He's as bad as any of the Hunters we've met, and maybe worse.

If this story were told from any other perspective, Joel would not be the hero. Imagine this story from Marlene's point of view: Marlene is no prize herself, taking part in violent and basically aimless guerrilla warfare. I'm sure she's gotten plenty of innocent people killed. But she considers her actions more righteous than she does Joel's. Tommy had vouched for Joel, but Marlene had no illusions about the kind of person Joel is. From the word go, she was aware that she was leaving Ellie in the hands of a murderer.

At the end of the story, when everything goes to shit, Marlene must think back to that moment in Boston, when she handed Ellie over. She must feel a kind of inevitability to how things turned out: She had limited options, so she gave Ellie over to a psychopath. And, look at what happened. If The Last Of Us had followed Marlene's trek across the country, with Joel as a side character, nobody would be on Joel's side. Joel's actions would seem incredibly tragic and insane.

But I don't feel that way about Joel. I've been given enough opportunity to see Joel as a regular person, that he remains humanized, despite his actions. At the end of the day, I'm on Team Joel, all the way.

I guess what I'm saying is that stories are bullshit. You can make anybody look bad, or anybody look good. It all depends on what slant you take. That's the beauty of our mushy, human brains.

The Power Plant Attack!

Hot shit! Now that the power plant is operational, the local raiders have decided to

attack! No time for arguing now! Time fer fightin'! It's a little arcadey, how all these enemies suddenly burst in. But it makes more sense than no sense, which is really all the sense I can ask for.

Fight Scenes

A common complaint about both Uncharted and The Last Of Us is that there's too much combat, and that the combat itself isn't so great. I disagree on both fronts: I love the combat in both series, excepting perhaps the original Uncharted. But in general, I could actually go for a little *more* combat.

I have a theory about why people sour on the combat in Naughty Dog games: It's because the storyline is so strong. The characters and plot are the main draw, so players begin seeing the combat as an impediment. It's as though the video game is getting in the way of their movie.

For players who only play Naughty Dog games once, I can understand that notion. I only really start to find the combat fun during subsequent playthroughs. There's a strong forward pull during that first playthrough, and having it interrupted can be frustrating.

But during later playthroughs, it's easier to focus on individual scenarios. I know what's coming next, so there's no big hurry to get there. I'm already where I want to be; I'm playing the game.

Once I get into that perspective, I don't mind playing a combat encounter over and over. It becomes fun to try different approaches and unusual strategies. Once you take the time to learn the systems of Uncharted and The Last Of Us, you start to realize how well crafted they are. It becomes like a zen exercise, trying to slowly puzzle out the best way forward.

The ship's hold from Uncharted 3, for example, becomes like a little zen garden. This guy's got a shotgun, that guy's got a shield, the whole place is eventually gonna tip over... It's fun, dude!

Delighting In Fighting

The tone of Tommy's power plant feels like a reversal of Pittsburgh. In Pittsburgh, the overall reason for being in the city was a bit contrived. But once there, the specific combat situations made sense. Here, the setup is great, but the combat feels forced. "They got in, and they're spread out in such a way as to make this an appropriate arena

for video game combat! Dammit, this always happens!" This fight definitely feels included for the sake of having a fight scene. The next fight, during the horse chase, feels much the same.

It might have been cool to remove all combat from this section. Maybe just keep that one fight in the ranch house, at the end. Raiders could have noticed the horses, and come in to investigate. Removing the other combat would be a ballsy move, and as I've said, I have no problem with fight scenes. But making this area fightless mighta been a neat thing to try. It'd be *artsy*.

However, that is not the case. So, fightin' it is!

Power Plant Battle Slog

The amount of strangling I'm doing is definitely starting to get weird. There are two large groups fighting, which are both very well armed. But I'm creeping around the battlefield, taking people out with my bare hands. I have a shotgun right on my back! But guns aren't my style. I prefer to sneak in, and murder up close, whispering into the ears of my prey. "You like this power plant? Yeah, it's a nice plant, and you'll never have it. Now, sleep... Sleep..." I bet I'm giving Tommy flashbacks.

This fight is pretty tough, even though there are a ton of people on my side. Tommy's group are not very good at shooting people, so it's mainly up to me and my stranglin' hands.

One detail I like is that when a bullet misses Joel, he flinches out of the way. It's a nice change from older games, where protagonists were like bricks, standing stock still no matter what happened to them. Little flecks of blood might fly off them, but that was about it.

I also like how Joel is sometimes knocked backward after getting shot. It's a little shocking when it happens, because it's so uncommon. Some bullets will graze Joel, hardly hurting him, while others are direct one-hit kills. I wonder if the type of bullet-wound is random, or if the game is actually keeping track of where I'm being shot?

I feel like there may be a level of depth going on here that's hard to be fully aware of. To see it, you need to be on your fourth playthrough, painstakingly fighting through every battle with your dumb fists. Only then, in that fevered state, do the depths of the combat begin to reveal themselves. Or, you may be losing your mind. Either way, it makes things seem cool.

Another nice touch is how characters will touch nearby walls. It felt a little heavy in Uncharted 3, where Drake would practically lean over to make sure he touched every surface. But here, wall-touching happens mainly while crawling. In older games, the character would have pressed their face into the wall, sliding along at a weird thirty degree angle. Here, Joel uses his arms to move along, so he doesn't look like he's face-planting straight into every surface. Futuristic!

My piles of combat attempts are starting to blend together. Twenty? Thirty? Eventually, I just start running, trying different routes to see what'll happen. I run around the back of some machinery, up the stairs to the second floor, through a door and out a window. I punch two guys to death, and finally get checkpointed at the next section. Fighting that first batch of enemies had been slow, painstaking, and ultimately pointless. Turns out the brave can just plow right past.

Once I trigger that next checkpoint, I hear someone through the radio say, "We got 'em!" Oh, did you? Did you, really? Are you sure the game isn't just clearing the enemies behind me from memory? You idiots sure got suspiciously effective, all of a sudden.

I do love finding weird stuff like that -- I never would have known you could run past that encounter, if I weren't playing this game like unto a fool. Though this means I didn't get a chance to steal the power plant schematic off the desk, which is a shame. Joel loves stealing those plans.

Bridge Battle

Now we're battling on the bridge-like section of the plant. It's kinda nice how the bad guys will look out for each other. I attack this one guy, and another guy notices, grabbing me from behind to help his buddy out. Those little touches make the enemies seem a lot more realistic.

I heard, I believe in the Grounded documentary, that in early builds, the fights were way too hard. The enemies could outflank you approximately always. It was more like how it would be if one guy really did take on ten guys -- He would be dead. So they had to dumb down the enemies a bit, to make the fights more fun to play.

Whoah -- I'm punching a guy near the railing, and I punch him right the fuck over the side! So long, dude! Not so smart now!

Sometimes, a bad guy decides it's time to take up a new position, and starts booking it. If you run after him, you can chase him pretty goddamn far. Their new position can be quite a distance away. It's interesting how during each new combat attempt, it seems like

enemies are spawning in different places. In areas like the Pittsburgh sniper neighborhood, they definitely are. But in more contained environments, they may be doing the actual legwork, and physically running to new spots each time.

I can't seem to take these guys out without taking at least two points of damage. So, fuck it. This is a short section anyway. I decide to accept the damage, and reckon that I'll be fine.

Fun With Grounded Mode: Teleporting Tommy

During the Grounded Mode version of this fight, I manage to run straight past the first section, using only a single brick to the face -- Even though Grounded mode is insanely hard, having my bricks and bottles back still makes things seem easier overall. Then I run straight to the door at the end of the bridge and toss a nail bomb, which blows up every motherfucker while they're still trying to pile out the door. Then, so as not to make me too impatient, Tommy teleports mega-quickly across the battlefield. Once there, he gingerly opens the door.

Henry and Tommy -- Both teleporters. Confirmed.

Inside The Plant

We enter the main office, and Tommy says, "Joel. Do your thing." Despite Tommy's own bodycount, he seems to see Joel in a different way. Tommy is a survivalist, but Joel is a step beyond. He seems to think of Joel as a murderer. Though to be fair, maybe the tone in Tommy's voice is just him being bitter about Joel shoving him earlier.

A lot of the concepts in The Last Of Us' combat aren't very complicated, but it's cool how well they work. For example, if a guy is looking at you and you run at him, he will blow you the fuck away. But if he's distracted and shooting at someone else, then you can run right over and punch him in the head! Bam! There's something satisfying about how simple and logical it can be.

So I do that kind of thing a few times, and everybody's dead! Yeah! There's a pool table here, in pretty good repair. Did Tommy's gang bring that here themselves? Man, those guys know how to live.

I know I just wrote about how much I like combat in Naughty Dog games, but with my itemless handicap, these fights are starting to feel pretty exhausting. There aren't a lot of big cool set pieces, like in Uncharted games. Last Of Us fights are generally flat, and

fairly straightforward. Everything's so hard, and so relentless, and everyone is such a prick... It reminds me of my first playthrough, when the fights were also a grind.

The whole situation really lends weight to the mindset that humanity is over, and that giving up seems like a real option. I've mentioned it before, but shit, that is meta: A game so tough that it makes you sympathize with the extinction of the whole human race. That's a pretty nice achievement.

Horseback

After the battle, Tommy agrees to take Ellie to the Fireflies. Tommy's wife Maria isn't too happy about that decision. I get the sense, the more I play, that people aren't quite comfortable with Joel. His quiet-murderer vibe is probably fairly palpable.

Ellie also isn't too happy about this news. So she steals a horse and gallops off. Dammit! We better gallop after her!

I'm almost surprised that Ellie is so resistant toward going with Tommy. Her life has been pretty fluid up to this point, and Tommy is clearly a capable guy. Not only capable, but probably also way nicer than Joel. Though maybe out in the harshness of the apocalyptic world, Joel's utter lack of hesitation about killing is a comfort. Maybe Ellie prefers traveling with an unflinching psycho-man.

Taking the story to its conclusion: If Ellie had gone with Tommy, the Great Firefly Massacre would never have happened. But on the other hand, Ellie would also be dead on an operating table. So, whatever, man. You're damned if you do, etc.

Horse Controls

I really liked the horse controls in *Shadow Of The Colossus*. I think the people who didn't were missing an important distinction: In *Shadow Of The Colossus*, you were commanding the horse, like a real rider would. You weren't controlling the horse directly. Once you got used to that idea, you could let the horse handle itself most of the time.

In comparison, riding a horse in other games feels like you're driving some kind of horse car. But given how little horseplay there is in *The Last Of Us*, these controls seem fine. They aren't breaking any molds, but this ain't some kinda horse-ridin' game. Let the horse games redefine the horses. I'm looking at you, Mary-Kate and Cloney-Kate.

Ambush!

While on horseback, if you look down past one of the guardrails, you can see the house where an ambush is about to happen. There's nobody down there, though.

And speaking of, whoah! We've been ambushed! This ambush really does feel weird. What happened when Ellie passed? Did she just blast through so quickly that the Hunters weren't ready? "Dang! Some chick just went by! Better set up our ambush, lickety split!" If I were gonna remove any fight from *The Last Of Us*, it would definitely be this one. It seems like the most artificial, hands down.

I'm at full health again, so I guess I didn't need to worry so much about that last fight. That's unusually nice of the Health Gods. They sure weren't this generous about health refills back in Pittsburgh.

I should probably take a little break from this game. I'm fifteen god damn hours in. Even on my first playthrough, I had everything stitched up by now. Itemless battling really is painstaking.

During this fight I take another two points of damage, but since I started at full health, it's no big deal. All that's left is the little fight in the ranch house, so I'm good. Do your worst, alpine murderers.

The Ranch House

I'm moseying along on my horse, to see if I can spot anything I hadn't noticed before. But my slowness fucks me up -- On the last jump before the ranch house, my horse's legs get stuck in the level architecture, and I have to restart the section. I'm playing this game at about half speed, and pushing at all its corners; I'm basically daring it to break. So, unsurprisingly, it has been breaking more than usual.

Ellie's horse is tied up outside of the titular ranch house, so it stands to reason that she's inside. Joel and Tommy tie up their horses, and head on in.

It's hard to judge the status of this house. It's definitely not twenty years dilapidated; it's actually in pretty good shape. All of its windows are intact, there's a chess board on the coffee table, with pieces still on it. But no one's lived here in a few years, at least. Lots of parts of the house are pretty messy, and the wine rack in particular is really dusty. How embarrassing.

Maybe some people were making a go of it here, until recently, when some Hunters

raided the place. Though there aren't any corpses, so maybe the residents actually made it out alive. Or maybe I'm looking way too much into the status of this one random house.

Hunters, man. They're the ones really fucking up the world. It's the classic zombie trope: All of this adversity could be overcome, if only people could band together. But they can't. Instead, it's an orgy of shameful, shameful murder.

I notice a couple of rats run into the laundry room. I never saw those dudes before. I wonder how many weird little rats might be sprinkled throughout the game that I never noticed? I guess I don't really care, which is good. Hunting through the game for potential rats would surely tip this project from a mildly-excessive-indulgence to a symbol-of-impending-mental-collapse.

There are a lot of pictures and board games in this house. The fact that it isn't ransacked makes it seem even more creepy. But, wait! This painting of horses running wild and free -- Is this the same as the painting above Joel's bed? When Joel sees this, I wonder if he thinks of home? Or maybe he thinks about how he shouldn't have bought such mass-produced, tacky horse art. This goddamn thing is everywhere, coast to coast.

There's half a scissor sitting on a desk. It looks like someone's been making shivs. Why you can't just stab someone with the full pair of scissors, I don't know. I'm sure it'll become clear when I'm eventually forced to shiv someone. Don't kid yourself, that day will come for us all.

Shiving A Real Life Human Being

<Inevitable shiv update pending.>

Joel And Ellie Discuss A Teenage Girl's Diary

The Last Of Us isn't too big on moments of emotional payoff. I initially found that weird, about the game's ending in particular. There was a lack of clear resolution; I was expecting a Lee-and-Clementine-style tearjerker. Sad, but definitive.

That didn't happen. In The Last Of Us, moments of emotional catharsis are few and far between. But this argument between Joel and Ellie is definitely one of them. It might be my favorite cutscene. Ellie drops all pretense of being tough, and just tells Joel that she's scared.

Joel tells her, "I trust (Tommy) more than I trust myself," and Ellie tells him to stop with the bullshit. But I think that's probably true. Joel's already starting to feel the twinge of co-dependence between he and Ellie, and he knows that connection has the potential to make him act real crazy.

Ellie tells Joel that she's sorry about his daughter, but that she's lost people too. Joel says, "You have no idea what loss is." I take Joel's point -- Not only did he lose a daughter, he lost a whole world. He watched an entire civilization disappear.

I don't think that devalues Ellie's struggle; it may even be more tragic, as she never even knew what the old world was like. But it is a different kind of loss. The weight of the loss that's pulling down Joel's mind is different. The old world isn't some theoretical place for him. He was there, and saw it all come down.

Playing Left Behind changes the tone of this scene a bit. When Joel says, "You have no idea what loss is," that pause before Ellie responds gains a lot of additional weight. In that moment, she must be thinking of Riley, and it must seem unbelievable to her that anyone in this world would have the gall to make a claim on loss.

When Ellie tells Joel that everyone she cared about had either died or left her, her expression is perfect. In some ways, these cut-scenes are better than movies. It's like the dream George Lucas had with Episode One, when he talked about being able to digitally alter the actor's performances. For him, it was the rambling of a lunatic. But here, it works.

Naughty Dog has the ability to tweak expressions, and to combine takes without cutting away, to construct a near-perfect scene. In general, video game storytelling is leagues below movies. But these motherfuckers have jumped so far ahead that, in some ways, these performances are better than movies. I'm sure thespians would hate to hear this, but the Naughty Dog method seems like a technological advancement in acting. These results are becoming better than what an unaided human could perform on their own. It's a computer-aided assist, combining the best elements of different performances into one incredibly tight scene.

Objectively Good

I know my predilection toward seeing art as objectively good or objectively bad is ultimately unhealthy. It's how my brain works, but I know I shouldn't give in to it. Trying to insist that my random opinions are "right" can only lead to a life of anger and crankitude.

However! I really don't think art is *entirely* subjective. Some things are clearly better than others. For example, the dialogue and acting in Naughty Dog games is better than it is in other games. It's not some kind of occasional accident -- It's *always* better. They have a method of production that consistently raises the level of what they produce.

They also have an ear for talent, and really good tonal taste. I've mentioned the story of Neil Druckmann insisting on multiple retakes of Sarah's death scene, because the scene can't just be "good". It's gotta be redone until it's *great*.

I imagine this was a similar scene. It turned out so well that I'm sure it must have taken a lot of work. If you were to submit a single scene as a quintessential example of how good The Last Of Us is, I think this would be it.

Music Cues

The music cues are also great in this game. Here, during this first real reckoning between Joel and Ellie, the wrong music would be disastrous. But the music carefully floats in, and sounds just right.

In the last few years, I've become very sensitive to music cues. Watching movies and tv shows from fifteen years ago, the music can be overwhelming. It's very on the nose, and almost always lacks subtlety. It's like a laugh track for emotions, and can start to feel suffocating.

The music in The Last Of Us doesn't feel that way. I think that can be partially attributed to its style. Less conventional musical styles can sometimes integrate more seamlessly than a standard score.

For example, in both Buffy and Angel, the music feels very heavy. Especially after repeated viewings, the score can seem very blunt and inelegant. There is never any ambiguity about how the score wants the viewer to feel.

On the other hand, the music in Firefly doesn't feel that way. All three shows are by Joss Whedon, follow a similar format and have a similar tone. But only the Firefly score services all the standard tv moments, while remaining unobtrusive and organic. Its bluegrass / world music style doesn't seem like music calculated to make an audience feel a certain way. It just feels like music.

The score of The Last Of Us has that same quality. It's often very understated, and doesn't feel manipulative. I remember watching a scene in the movie The Road, where a potentially dangerous group was approaching. The score swelled, super-big, and it

seemed so unnecessary. The music didn't need to give me that tip-off. In fact, by doing so, it completely took me out of the moment. Quietness would have worked so much better.

Music: Just another way in which The Last Of Us outclasses everybody. I know Naughty Dog themselves can't be this obnoxious about their achievements, but I can. Naughty Dog fucking rules. They rule, and everyone else sucks. Haha! Take that, everyone else!

Yarr! Them's fighting words! So, back to fighting!

Joel In: Ranch Battler

I like this ranch fight. It's short, and not too hard, but it allows for some unique moments. This is where I first realized how cool the smoke bomb is. It's probably the most ignored item, because it doesn't damage anyone directly. But messing with people who are caught in the smoke is a pretty fun thing to do. Not for this Joel, though. This Joel can only dream of having a smoke bomb.

So, it's back to the creeping and the strangling. The last couple guys in this fight look pretty old, maybe nearing Joel's age. I hadn't been paying much attention to the enemy's faces. I wonder what the ratio of young to old Hunters is? Maybe someone, an inmate or what-have-you, could design a pie chart.

Tommy's Town

The gang heads back to Tommy's town, and seeing it all lit up is pretty beautiful. Tommy saying "Kids'll be watching movies tonight" is one of the lines from this game that stuck with me the most. It's one of those errant thoughts that comes to me while I'm lying in bed: Imagine being an apocalypse kid, who doesn't have any real connection to the old way of life. You might be holed up in an old house, and you might come across some occasional canned food, or an old magazine. You would have small clues about how the old world was.

Then, imagine being able to watch a movie. It would be an enormous leap. The old world would suddenly be fully presented to you, in living color. I don't know if that would be a nice thing to do for a kid, or a terrible thing. It would be like having a genie show you a vision of a different world, but then disappearing without giving you a wish.

Maybe the disparity isn't so bad for these kids, because Tommy's town does seem like a

real town. A poor town, but not that different from all the places in the Canadian north. I've known people from tiny towns, where people have to make weekly supply runs, or where supplies need to be flown in during the winter. Those places have a bit of a weird way of life, but they do have electricity, and they have movies to watch. Once you've hit that baseline, it doesn't matter too much where you are -- You're still basically connected to modern life. And Tommy's town has those things. It's not too far off from how the more remote towns of our time operate.

Joel decides he's going to continue on with Ellie, but I wonder if it's not entirely because of Ellie that he's making that decision. Maybe Joel is realizing that he doesn't want to pull Tommy away from this place. Tommy harbors a lotta hurt about the life he and Joel led after the collapse. He holds a lot of resentment toward Joel. But he seems to have found some peace here. He's doing good with this group. Maybe Joel realizes that pulling Tommy away would be asking too much.

Tommy says the Fireflies are at the University of Eastern Colorado. Joel says, "Go Big Horns." I like how he says those three words like they're a small in-joke. But the reality of the joke is enormous: Remember how things used to be? Remember that world?

Go Big Horns

Watching the Last Of Us director's commentary, I learned that the University Of Eastern Colorado doesn't exist. "Go Big Horns" does not refer to any actual team. I don't know enough about football, or American geography, to recognize what's real and what isn't. Like the FEDRA signs, it's another case of not knowing what I don't know.

Leaving Tommy

Tommy tells Joel there's a place for him in their town. The camera lingers on Joel's face, and he looks so old... It makes me think back to the game's introduction, when Tommy and Joel were escaping the city together. Back then, Joel had never killed anyone, and Tommy hadn't either.

Now Tommy's looking at his brother, but it's really not the same person. If Joel were a stranger, Tommy's group probably wouldn't want him around. He's dangerous, he's too far gone. It must be obvious by Joel's whole demeanor that he's broken down, and that he's not someone you can really trust.

But technically, this guy is still Tommy's brother. There's a blood bond, so Tommy's gotta invite him in, and try not to think about all the things that have happened in the

past twenty years.

What game has moments this good? I mean, I love video games, and I spend a ton of time playing them. A lot of games are pretty great. But there's no other game with moments like this. They just don't exist.

It's a beautiful moment. However, once Joel and Ellie ride off, they probably realize that it's almost nightfall, and that they didn't grab any extra supplies. I'm guessing they might regret not having waited until morning to head off. I'm gonna assume that after the cut to black, they change their mind, go back into town, and set off again the next morning, in a more prepared fashion.

The University Of Eastern Colorado

Back to full life!

5/5 health
4 9mm bullets
7 revolver bullets
6 shotgun shells
1 health kit
1 nail bomb

We rejoin our heroes as they approach the University campus. Joel and Ellie, still on horseback, trot around and check out the surroundings. We come across the homemade flamethrower, and leaving it behind is one of the few times that this no-item playthrough makes *more* sense. There's no way Joel would carry that thing around, let alone fire it up. Some weird, rigged-up flamethrower, that's just been left lying around? That's a clear recipe for blowing oneself up.

There's a log left by some Firefly lookouts -- It mentions that they needed six guards to escort one truck, suggesting that things outside had become worse than the lookout remembered them being. Some scientists and biologists arrived, and the lookouts commented that having them around meant having more mouths to feed. So the Fireflies as a whole are not overly concerned with science, or with finding cures for the pandemic. They have more base concerns, such as simply having food to eat.

I keep stumbling across incidental dialogue that I missed during my other playthroughs. It's not dialogue that has a prompt, but the kind that just happens, or doesn't. Ellie asks what people did at the University. Then I have to reload for some reason, and the second time, she doesn't ask. I wonder how much stuff is still hidden in this game that I haven't found? That's where my gamer OCD kicks in... I wish I could just know that I've heard everything. I wish I could be Last Of Us certified.

Interactivity

Exploring the University, it seems like Naughty Dog does a pretty good job of telegraphing where you can and cannot go. They're very deliberate about including boarded up windows, or putting debris in front of places where you can't explore.

But I'm coming at this from a lifetime of game-playing: New players may not recognize these things as indicators of non-interactivity. I heard an anecdote, on a podcast whose name I have forgotten, about how a guy's friend was confused by the non-interactive

bottles in the upcoming lab. Whereas I didn't even notice there *were* non-interactive bottles. I knew they weren't relevant, so I ignored them. For a new player, parsing the elements which can and cannot be manipulated really must seem arbitrary and confusing.

New Players

I've never been very interested in the debate of "What video games should you give to a new player?" It's similar to the "What comic books are good for introducing a new reader?" This is rarely asked by outsiders who are becoming interested in a hobby. Instead, it's debated by lifelong fans, looking for ways to rope our poor acquaintances into our lives of unmitigated nerdery.

So how about, no game? How about, no comic book? Be into whatever you're into, and let other people be into whatever they're into. If they find something within your subculture that they like, that's great. But lay off with the evangelizing. I've heard the debate so many times, and it always feels like trying to get someone's Mom to watch you leap off a diving board.

That's the second time I've made that reference. You really don't notice these repeated analogies, until a book is all finished. Maybe it can be a game! Find all the doubled-up content! If you do, you win... some fish! From the river! Just go get 'em, they're yours! If anyone gives you shit, just tell them you won Keith's Contest. They'll know what you mean, and they'll be jealous that you won.

Environmental Exploration

This next observation may also come down to having a pre-existing video game vocabulary. But I like how clearly delineated the combat and non-combat areas are in *The Last Of Us*. It's almost like an on/off switch: Here, you need to be concerned with combat, and here, you can focus on exploration. The two rarely bleed together, and it gives the player a strong incentive to examine the world Naughty Dog has created.

Many games involve environmental storytelling, but it's hard to focus on the finer details while your mind is preoccupied with survival. *Gone Home* is a good example of a game that stripped away combat, in order to be solely about piecing together an environmental story. That singular focus really made the environment pop, in a way that it would not if the player were perpetually distracted by imminent death.

When people claimed that *Gone Home* was "not a game", they were just failing to

recognize what type of game it is. Studying an environment is a valid gameplay conceit in and of itself. It's just as fun, in its own way, as shooting fools in the face.

I like how The Last Of Us offers both gameplay styles: You spend a lot of time soaking in the world, learning about the people who live there, and considering the plight of the planet at large. Then you spend time breaking a baseball bat over a motherfucker's head, and maybe thinking about the implications of that, as well.

It's good stuff, and that duality is something The Last Of Us probably deserves more credit for. In most games, an "empty" level just means you've cleared out the enemies, and then gotten lost. Here, the enemy-free environments are considered an equally important part of the overall experience.

Bare Knuckle

I'm trying to put off dealing with this next fight, so let me yammer for a bit about playing such a stripped-down, simplified version of The Last Of Us. Thank you, you're too kind.

One aspect I enjoy about playing as a base character, with no additional weapons or abilities, is the streamlined arcadeyness of it. It hearkens back to how games used to be played -- You had a character, and he could do a couple of things. Your task was to use those limited tools to navigate the adventure.

It can be fun to face such a straight up, intractable, mechanical challenge. It isn't something you see often in modern games. Character building is common, and can be rewarding in its own right. But right now, I'm playing as Base Joel -- These fists and a few items are all I've got, and I need to find a way to leverage those basic skills, and keep pushing forward.

In Dead Space, I beat the whole game with the first weapon, the Plasma Cutter. I ended up getting a little trophy for doing it, but I wasn't trying to. I just liked that gun. I liked the mechanical challenge of having a small, rotatable weapon, which I had to use to carefully shoot each enemy limb. The bigger guns didn't seem as interesting.

Far Cry 2 is a relatively recent example of a very arcadey game. Once you get a few guns and the camo suit, your mechanical ability is all that's really important. Any variance in magazine size or grenade limit is relatively inconsequential; no one is gonna brute-force their way through that game.

A common complaint about Far Cry 2 is that the enemies continually respawn, but I like

that. Far Cry 2 isn't about building stats, or clearing outposts. It's about moment to moment vigilance, about making your way from point A to point B, and making sure that you're always one step ahead of the crazily-precise enemies -- That's Far Cry 2 in a nutshell. And because of the respawning enemies, that pressure never abates.

Far Cry 3, on the other hand, is about awareness of a larger situation. It's about slowly clearing a map, which is also fun. But it's a very different experience. In Far Cry 2, there's very little concern about the greater situation, because the greater situation cannot be meaningfully affected. By subtracting that larger goal, the focus remains continually on the present moment.

I've created a somewhat-similarly streamlined version of The Last Of Us. I don't need to worry about character stats, or weapon upgrades, or crafting inventory. I only need to worry about how I'm gonna punch the next enemy in the face. The moment is all that matters, because the moment is the only thing I can meaningfully affect.

Does that style of simplified gameplay become monotonous? Sometimes. But it's also fun, in an old-school way. C'mere, face! I got some fists for ya, and for all your friends! You want a sleeper hold? I've got one of those too! Gla-gegh!! Repeat forever!

Infected Congregating 'Round A Generator

Despite all the rambling I just did about how The Last Of Us separates combat and exploratory scenes, this University section has a much greater mixture of combat and non-combat than usual. Also, despite all the rambling I just did about enjoying a straightforward playthrough, I'm about to have my limited combat vocabulary sorely tested.

I come upon some Infected hanging out by a generator, and my presence makes them freak out. They surrounded me, putting Joel in his "cowering" pose. That doesn't happen much; I forgot it was a thing.

I wonder why all these Infected are hanging out by a generator? There's a big clump of them, very near to the spot where the game offered me a flame thrower... The intention is obvious. I'm supposed to punch them.

These Infected really are on a hair trigger. Taking them out stealthily doesn't seem like an option. When they attack together, it's a disaster. I start leading them down to the courtyard, so Ellie can take potshots at them. Also, I want her to see a man punch a zombie to death with his bare hands. That's important for every kid to see. But if they arrive in a group, it's all over. They overbear poor old Joel, putting him into that

cowering position instantly.

I fail again and again, and I don't know if there's actually any way to do this. There are a crap-ton of Infected here, and not very many places to run. It's easy for them to flank on both sides, and then I'm done for. It might be time to finally break out the nail bomb that Bill gave me.

I've never managed to stealth kill one of these pricks. Are these the Stalker-type enemies? There's a trophy for stealth-killing a Stalker, but in this instance, I don't think that's possible. These Infected are incredibly touchy.

Sometimes I can stir them up, then run away far enough that they calm down and start stalking again. But they still stay mostly clumped together, shuffling along in a conga line of death.

Sometimes they all go back to the generator room, like I'm playing Pac-Man and they're the ghosts. Why are they acting so weird? What the hell am I supposed to do with these wacky bastards? Maybe there are zombie pheromones near that generator. Maybe Infected like to huff gas. Maybe they're trying to escape family problems.

Zombie Or Not Zombie

"Technically, they're not zombies," I hear some of the more annoying among you intoning. Yes, they are. Fuck you. I don't care how these particular creatures became shambling, violent meat-masses. It could be a monkey bite, a cordyceps fungus, a voodoo ritual. Maybe there was no more room in hell, or maybe a passing meteorite re-animated them. It doesn't matter. They're zombies. They're all zombies.

"But they're not technically dead. Zombies are re-animated corpses, and these-"

Stop it. Just stop it. It's been decades of this shit. This is not a valuable conversation. Though it's a conversation which I wrote out for no apparent reason, so who's laughing now? Not me, and not you. No one is laughing. Think about it.

Some Of These Fights, Man...

It ain't gonna be easy, but I think I might be able to win this battle if I treat it like a racing game. Hear me out. If I just keep running through the hallways, like a circuit, throwing a punch or two when I can, and turning 180 degrees when there are too many enemies, I might be able to slowly kill them all. It's still gonna take a little luck, as I'll

need to keep trying until the Infected react correctly. But it seems like that 180 degree turn maneuver might be useful after all.

It seems to be working, but I wish these bastards didn't take so many punches to kill. Going into Joel's head-crush animations is almost a bad thing, because it takes too long. It gives another Infected time to rush up behind me. It's better to let a quick, anti-climactic jab serve as the final blow.

I manage to take out two Infected, then lose the others, so they return to the generator room. (I just noticed that these Infected are all female, incidentally.) I make them angry, and only two of the remaining three give chase. If I can run the loop and find that straggler, I can take it out. I run all the way around, back to the generator room, where it's still waiting. Then I lay it out, leaving only two.

I sure hope I don't fuck this up. These Infected are seriously, ridiculously brutal. If they get their hands on me, I take shitloads of damage. I see one wander back to the generator room alone, but the second shows up just as I start throwing punches. I finish the first one just in time to take on the second -- It's a close call, but I make it! I beat all these crazy maniacs with my bare fists, without taking any damage! Insane.

I know this is the least inspiring example that may have ever existed in all of human existence, but kids: Follow your dreams. No matter what dumb, ridiculous shit you wanna achieve, if you just keep at it, you can do it. You can do it! Yeah!

That really did seem impossible. But now that I've done it, I feel like I could do it again. That's a Dark Souls mantra -- It's only hard until you've done it. Sure, New Game Plus Manus seems ridiculous at first. But once you figure him out, it seems like you could do it fifty more times. Even if you couldn't.

The fact that this itemless playthrough continues to be possible is pretty astounding. Now that I'm this deep in, it's starting to feel surreal. I haven't seen Joel pull a gun or use a bandage in so long... It's like I really am playing some weird zombie-punching game, where getting bit once equals death. Who would make this game? Who would play it? What is going on here?

Perhaps diving deeper into the madness will reveal the answers. So let us sally forth! No, that was too exuberant. This should be more solemn.

Let us bow our heads, take stock of our momentary existence on this fragile blue marble, spinning pointlessly through space... and sal forth. That's the masculine conjugation of "sally forth".

The Campus Gates

Now that the generator's running, we can open an electric gate and head through. "Hey," Ellie says. "I was thinking I'd have liked to be an astronaut." NOT NOW, ELLIE. DO YOU KNOW WHAT I JUST DID? DIDN'T YOU SEE ME RUNNING ALL AROUND LIKE A CRAZY MAN, PUNCHING MONSTERS? I'M A LITTLE FREAKED OUT RIGHT NOW.

It is kinda funny that Ellie thinks being all alone in space would be cool, since she basically got her wish, here on this empty Earth. But I guess it's all relative. The Earth probably seems empty to Joel, but to Ellie, maybe it seems full. Not only full, but full of murderers. I guess outer space might not be so bad.

Joel says that as a kid, he wanted to be a singer. It's a great point of restraint that there's not a direct call back to that. Joel doesn't sing a song as he's drifting off into death, or any shit like that.

I find a room I'd never been in before, right before the courtyard full of monkeys. You have to climb onto a dumpster, and up into a room that's missing a wall. There are some pills, some gears, and a Firefly pendant. In other words, BULLSHIT. But it's always cool to find a new place.

We see some monkeys, running across the campus. We'll soon learn, from an audio log, that a guy deliberately let those infected monkeys free, and then got bit by one. Whatta maroon. So we also learn that monkeys can carry the cordyceps virus, but it doesn't seem to affect them the way it does people. Maybe it makes them a little more bitey, but hey, they are monkeys.

Outside The Gates

I spend a little time looking through the university gates, at the view of Colorado. I'm just looking at stuff, but it starts to make me think of the terror of living in the Last Of Us world. Nature is quickly reclaiming the Earth -- There's an enormous expanse in all directions with no people in it. Walking through that world would be so lonely, and so scary. And then, if you did come upon a person, that might be even scarier.

In an environment that harsh, I can imagine getting to a point where your brain just won't turn over. You'd wake up, feeling totally overwhelmed, and that feeling just wouldn't go away. Looking at that giant, open vista, the idea of having a partner seems very important. The only thing that might make this situation worse would be having to face it alone. Joel's connection to Ellie isn't only about emotional survival; having a unit

is also about physical survival. Survival survival.

Or, maybe having a partner is just a lotta Hawaiian shirt nonsense, and you're better off alone. Big ups, Bill. Who knows what words you're speaking to yourself right now.

I find another room I'd never been in before, across from the gate. It's full of bunks, with a lot of pictures on the walls. These pictures being left behind must mean that the Fireflies evacuated the University in a hurry. Either that, or the people who put up these pictures died in the line of duty. Spooky!

I find a map of the campus, and it has notes about Infected getting through the gates. It does seem like a pretty impossible perimeter to keep guarded. It's a whole campus, after all. Maybe that's why the Fireflies left.

The Remoteness Of Universities

I read an article about assaults at the York University campus in Toronto; it's a huge problem, because the campus is in a relatively remote location, and is a huge array of buildings that cannot be adequately policed. People at downtown campuses are much safer, because even at night, there are people around.

I never realized, until reading that article, how much of a problem isolation is, in relation to crime. It's interesting that a university campus at night acts as a kind of stand-in for the apocalypse: It's too big, too deserted, and basically impossible to police.

The Dorm

There's another generator on the other side of a gate, so Joel leaves Ellie waiting on horseback as he cuts through a dorm. He comes across a huge, spore filled hole in the floor. So he does what we'd all do: He dives right in.

I'm sure one of the hallway windows could have been forced, or something. I really don't think Joel would go down there. It might feel a little Uncharted-like for the floor to give out underneath him, but at least that would explain what the fuck he's doing in the basement. The crazy old prick.

Maybe he wants to get bitten. Maybe he really can't believe that he's still alive, but his iron-clad instincts won't let him run headlong into a Clicker. So he keeps putting himself in dangerous situations, just hoping for sweet, sweet death.

It seems like this nest has been here since before the Fireflies. It's really densely spored, and every Infected has evolved into a Clicker. There's even a Bloater down here. This pot of death has been stewing for awhile.

Death By Clicker

The Clicker kill animation is a quick bite to the neck, and the game cuts to black. My guess is that, unlike the other death animations, Joel isn't actually dead at that point. It's just a little neck-bite, not nearly as drastic as having your jaw torn off or whatnot. I think the Clicker bite mainly signifies that Joel's been infected, and hence is as good as dead. So rather than watch him succumb over the next day or so, we save some time and cut straight to the reload screen.

The normal Infected have a similar neck-bite attack, which they bust out if you struggle with them for long enough. No matter how much life you have, once they bite your neck, you're done. So I don't know that the Clickers have a better bite; maybe they just have really strong arms. All the better to hold you down, while they bite you all up!

You'll notice, particularly if playing as a weaponless puncher, that the Clickers won't actually insta-kill you unless they're swinging their arms around all crazy-like. When their arms are calm, you can even get in a punch or two. But once those arms are going, you can't resist their assault, and get bitten immediately.

The Dorm Basement

Man, this spore-dorm is fucked. There are big weird fungal growths all over the walls and ceiling. All you've gotta do is move slowly and you'll be safe, but it's still pretty goddamn creepy. I guess that's why having Joel fall through a weak floor wouldn't have worked -- The Infected would have been on alert, and the creeping dread factor would have been gone. Along with Joel's face.

But with a little sneaking, and some quick button-mashing at a Bloater-adjacent exit door, Joel escapes unscathed. I wonder if people on lower difficulties just kill all these Infected? I can't re-iterate enough times that *The Last Of Us* should be played on Hard or above. The experience really is heightened by having fewer options. Killing all these terrifying Infected would just be some action-movie bullshit.

Joel heads back upstairs, into the non-infected dorms. It's oddly funny when Joel opens a drawer and there's nothing in it. On higher difficulties, that happens a lot, and the way his character model reverts to normal seems a bit like he's dropping his shoulders. He's

bummed about how much this apocalypse sucks. It's like, why even bother opening drawers? They're just gonna be empty. I mean, frig, man. Whatever.

The girl who lived in one of these rooms had like ten different purses. I have no commentary or theories about that. She just had a lot of purses. And yet, they could not save her.

One room has a newspaper clipping, which states that about sixty percent of the population was dead or infected. Even at that advanced stage, they were still making newspapers. Good on ya, newsies.

The article says that search and rescue operations had been suspended. The people holed up at this university realized that no one was coming to save them. In fact, that was probably them, downstairs. Still chillin'. All mushroomed up, having a spore party.

Joel reconvenes with Ellie, though doesn't mention the crazy death-pit he just waded through. Joel's not a braggart, I'll give him that. They open the gate, then saunter along on the horse. Ellie asks about Joel's wife. He stops her, but is more polite about it than he was in the past.

I get that Joel's trying to keep his feelings protected, and I also get that I'm no therapist. But there does come a point when I think, Geez, Joel. Don't be such a wimp. Maybe if you had a nice cry about these things, they wouldn't seem so tough to talk about. You FUCKING BABY. I lied, I am a therapist.

Optional Conversations

There's an optional conversation on this campus where Joel and Ellie talk about how sports fans were similar to idol worshipers. I've never found that dang thing. I seriously don't know how I keep missing it. I only know about it at all because I saw it on YouTube. I'm not a huge fan of these optional conversations.

I looked it up -- It turns out it's right at the start of the area, high up on a wall. That must be the classic "players don't tend to look up" conundrum that the Portal Developer Commentary warned us about.

I looked up a video of all the optional conversations, just to make sure I'm not missing any others. Hearing Joel and Tess' banter again, now that I'm this deep into the game, makes Joel seem like a much different guy. With Tess, he's a lot more jokey and open. I guess I didn't notice the change, because there's not much time spent between just Joel and Tess. But it now seems obvious that Tess' death shut Joel down a lot more than I'd

realized.

The actors really do a great job in this game. Overall, the writing is good, but there's always gonna be an occasional clunky line. "[Suicide] ain't easy. For many, it was easier than letting a Hunter or a Clicker do it for them." Not the worst line, but one that would come off like a lead balloon in most games. But here, Troy Baker makes his way past it, no problem. You're in good hands with The Last Of Us. You ain't gotta do this game any favors. This game does favors for you.

Inside The University

Joel and Ellie tie up their horse, and climb their way into the university lab. Hey, check it out! More bricks and bottles everywhere! Joel, my friend, we are gonna have a *fight!* God wouldn't have left these items lying around if we weren't intended to kill some people with them.

Limited Assets

I'm giving The Last Of Us an unusual amount of scrutiny during this playthrough, and on that note: I'm noticing that the hospital equipment in this scene repeats a lot. What a kick in the dick it must be to make a video game: You slave away for years, just so some guy can comment that there aren't as many miscellaneous background objects as there could be. I'm sure that's what everyone on the dev team was hoping for.

Joel's Psychological Trauma

My justification for why Joel isn't picking up items is that he's so shell shocked from his brutal life, so apocalypse-addled, that his mind can't see helpful objects. To him, the world looks even more barren than it actually is.

The deeper I get into the game, the more easily I can buy into that fiction. If you role-play anything for long enough, it starts to feel valid. I open an old locker, and a fair amount of stuff is inside. But Joel just stares at it for a moment, then walks away. It's a creepy feeling moment.

In every playthrough, I've had periods where I'm just dying for a particular item type. I'm one piece of cloth away from crafting a health kit, for instance, and it drives me nuts not being able to find it.

Now, leaving everything behind feels almost enlightened. It's the apocalypse; we're all dead men walking. So I'll either survive, or I won't. Why bother trying to tip the scales with an old pair of scissors? What kind of a joke is that? Fuck it. Just leave it there.

The X-Ray Room

It's eerie to walk past the balcony where I know Joel is soon gonna fall to his impalement. And we're not talking about one of those bullshit Tomb Raider impalements, where you just brush yourself off and keep on going. This one's gonna take some antibiotics to fix! Minimum!

Joel finds an x-ray of a patient who's infected with the cordyceps fungus. The x-ray shows how the fungus grows all around the brain. I sure hope that fact doesn't come back to cause trouble in the future.

We hear noises in the lab, and it turns out to be infected monkeys. Monkeyland, this section should be called. Maybe this whole game. Don't Get Funky And Especially Not Bunky With Those Damn Junkie Monkeys: The Last Of Us 2. I'm not gonna use that, so feel free.

I've switched to decaf, and I'm not sure if it's better.

The Monkey Victim

The main office is empty, but Joel finds a voice recorder, on a corpse. This is the guy who released the infected monkeys, and got immediately bitten. Surely there's a lesson there.

It's a little convenient that this guy's recording was made during the exact moment when he was bitten by an infected monkey. But in Bioshock, it was convenient that the entire city was swept up in an audio-diary craze. So, I guess all things are relatively even.

This guy's voice recording starts waxing philosophical about the nature of death, so Joel fast-forwards him. Ha! That's one of the greatest gaming moments of all time. The first time I saw it, I really laughed. Take that, video games!

Maybe it wasn't intended as a message to all pretentious, badly written video games, but to me it was a clear statement. "Hey, other games: You, with your dumb, boring, unskipable shit -- Fuck you! Fuck you, and shut up!" Video game writers really seem to like hearing themselves talk, and on average, they've gotta be the worst bunch of hacks that

ever cobbled a story together.

That was mean. I guess I could take it back.

...Yep... I guess I could take it back...

The truncated recording informs our heroes that they have to go to Salt Lake City in order to find the relocated Fireflies. Then, a bullet whizzes in from outside! Yaaaah! Duck and cover, Ellie! Dammit, who is that? Raiders? I knew it! Those bricks didn't lie!

But before we get into that battle, let's take a moment to rummage through our backpack, and listen to the rest of that recording. Having Joel skip it was funny, but this is *The Last Of Us* -- When this game talks, I listen. I sit at its learning tree, and eat of its delicious bounty. See, *that's* how you do writing.

The monkey-victim says that he joined the Fireflies soon after the outbreak. The Fireflies must have been a pretty decent force for awhile, and apparently held their numbers as the rest of the world declined. But by this point, the Fireflies are also dwindling. Whole world's falling apart, Mal.

I wonder about the government that's running the few remaining Quarantine Zones. Who's at the head of that? How is that group managing to hold together? Is trying to retain the concept of a country as massive as America really a good idea? Realistically, things should be smaller, and more regional. If there was ever a time for the Confederate States to rise again, this is it. Centralized government, my eye! We tried that, and look what happened! Everyone turned into zombies! That sure as shootin' ain't a coincidence! So now, the Republic of North Carolina is gonna assert its will, and there will be back-yard wrestling for all! Yeeeeeeehaw!!

Patriotism

Speaking of These United States, the monkey-bite guy mentions that he couldn't give up on his country. Tommy had a huge American flag hanging at the dam. The love for America is still running pretty strong.

I thought it was a myth that Americans felt such investment in their country. It wasn't until I moved to New York for a couple of years that I realized how different Canadians and Americans actually are. Americans really do believe that their country is important. Not only that, but they find it hard to believe that other countries *don't* feel that way.

The whole thing is really bizarre to me. No one's pledging allegiance in Canada. Amer-

icans probably see that as a bad thing, but we feel just the opposite. An allegiance to an idea as abstract as a "country" feels very old-world to us. Primitive, you might say. We're polite about it, but our attitude is much closer to: Fuck your country, fuck your officials, and fuck anyone who's involved in this tribal nonsense. Countries and governments are systems intended to keep general order, and that's it.

The American notion of a "country" being an important thing is pretty deeply ingrained in their society. I do believe that after an apocalypse, a lot of people would want to "save America". They'd hang American flags, they'd sing the national anthem. Even twenty years on, when America is obviously gone, some people would still hold on to that old concept of mass-identity.

I guess that kind of conformity can have its uses. But if you're a "patriotic American", I would urge you to examine that belief. The idea of a country having value, above and beyond its actual citizenry, is not a wavelength that most people in the educated world are on. And as the rest of the world continues to progress, it's gonna become important for you to know that.

And ditch the fucking imperial measurements, already. Remember that Mars probe that failed, because the American team was measuring in fucking *inches*? They were trying to take *inches* into *outer space*. Christ's sake, guys. Get with the program.

The Lab Battle

Now that I've offended Americans, AGAIN, let's get back to our regularly scheduled recap of gruesome virtual murders. Ellie has become a killing machine: She jumps on the back of the first guy who attacks us, taking him out. Then she stabs the next guy right in the stomach, and starts firing rounds at him. I haven't even lifted a finger yet. Shit, kid.

It definitely seems like it's easier to land the first punch if you're running. As it is with the Infected, so it is with the human. I'm walking backward as a guy takes a swing at me with a 2x4, and it narrowly misses me. I've never seen that happen before. Considering this game essentially has a one-button melee system, a lot of neat shit can happen. Positioning and timing make a huge difference to the outcome.

Since this is the chapter where Joel gets the shit beat out of him, and comes extremely close to death, I decide not to worry about taking damage during this fight. It makes more narrative sense for him to be roughed up. I should be down to a sliver of health by the end of this, if I wanna make things feel accurate.

This one guy runs up the stairs and straight toward the lab, apparently assuming that's where all the shit is going down. But I'm crouched next to the stairs, so he runs right by me. I actually feel a little bad for him as my fist careens into the back of his head. He was so excited! What a way to go.

I also assume that both of Joel's hands are broken messes by now. All the bones must have fused together, shaped into two orbs suitable only for clubbing. That's another explanation for why he so rarely fires a gun, or picks anything up: He's got club-hand.

The last enemy stays ducked by the railing, and refuses to come after me. I've already taken a couple points of damage, but since he won't move, I have to run at him. And as we know, running toward an armed enemy is the #1 don't-ever-do-this rule. But I have no choice.

I barrel toward him, taking a bullet, taking *another* bullet, then punching him in the face. So I get my wish -- I get to the end of this fight with only a tiny sliver of health left.

Grounded Mode Update!

On Grounded difficulty, this part is really, really hard. Like, christ, it's hard. I'm not sure how many tries it took me, but probably about the same number of tries it would take for me to really kill a bunch of guys all by myself, if life allowed for such experiments.

Joel's Impalement

As a reward for his victory, Joel gets in a tussle, and falls from the balcony onto a piece of rebar. Like Cordelia in Buffy Season 3, am I right?

What the fuck is "rebar", anyway? I'll look it up... Turns out it's short for "reinforcing bar". Cool. Okay, no more time for learning! We've gotta stumble our way out of here!

Joel stumbling through the building is a pretty brutal scene. When he tries to climb through a window and collapses, it's a shocking moment. Falling on the rebar was bad, but that happened in a cut-scene. Cut-scenes and gameplay feel very different, so to see Joel's debilitated state spill over into the gameplay proper feels unsettling.

A bad guy pins us down, and Ellie tells Joel to stay put; she's gonna go flank this asshole. Joel reaches for her and says "Ellie", but she's gone. It's the fear of letting your child go off on their own, to try to make their way in the world. Except here, it means letting your child go off to try to kill a man without getting killed right back.

Ellie pulls off the flank, and we continue stumbling along. I love how Joel keeps insisting that he's okay, and rather than comfort him, Ellie finally snaps and says, "Then fucking walk!"

I was wrong, there is a callback to Joel's singing. Ellie says, "If we get out of this, you're so singing to me." Maybe that wasn't strictly necessary. But once again, The Last Of Us manages to walk the line without treading over it. I know: If I love The Last Of Us so much, why don't I marry it? Listen, man -- If I could, I would.

Joel is leaning on Ellie, in the classic "Uncharted 2 Camera Guy Jeff" pose. Old Jeff's predicament seemed pretty harrowing back then, but this seems much worse.

If you turn around and try to get Joel to walk the wrong way, he just takes a step and stops. That's a pretty good way to handle it. Again, player agency is sometimes overrated. If a character would absolutely not do a thing, you don't need to let the player do that thing. People always comment on Gordon Freeman's muteness, but his non-stop jumping is probably referenced far more often in his police reports.

Something about this last bad guy, trying to steal the horse, always seems funny to me. His friends are inside doing whatever the hell they're doing, and this guy is like, "Yeah! I got me a horse!" Then some kid suddenly shoots him. When he woke up this morning, he could not have seen that coming.

In the time we've been in that building, it's started snowing. We get a little ways on horseback, and Joel just straight up falls off, like a sack of bleeding potatoes. That part is so brutal. It's one of the scariest moments of the game, for sure.

The Virtue Of Flatly Lying To Everyone

The way the screen goes black after Joel falls from the horse, then cuts to winter, with us now playing as Ellie -- Man, that's so fucking great. The first time, I really thought Joel might be dead. The game had been bananas enough that I really believed Naughty Dog would do it.

Apparently, whenever journalists asked, Naughty Dog flatly denied that Ellie would be a playable character. Then, after the game came out, they apologized. It was a good move; I was really glad not to have known. Keep on lying, Naughty Dog. I trust you more than I trust myself. You don't give me what I want. You give me what I *need*.

Winter

5/5 health
bow

I love this winter section. Though during this replay, I think my favorite section has been Tommy's Dam, narratively-speaking. Tommy's town is really the high point of hopefulness in the game, the best chance for the title *The Last Of Us* to feel like an exaggeration.

If humankind is gonna make it without a vaccine, then Tommy's group is the best example we see of how that might happen. Having electricity is gonna make them a target, and their group of twenty families is not especially safe from groups of raiders. But, maybe they'll make it. I believe in those fuckers.

The winter, though -- As a small, mostly contained story... Christ, it's good. This game could have sped from Colorado straight to Salt Lake City, but I'm sure glad it didn't. This little detour is pretty goddamn wonderful.

Black And White

Sometimes I like to play games with the color setting on the television turned all the way down, and the contrast turned up. Black and white can look really cool, and this winter section of *The Last Of Us* looks especially pretty. If you have all the time in the world, and only this one game to play over and over, I recommend giving it a go!

Ellie's Stuff

Apparently a lot of people missed the fact that Ellie has stuff in her backpack. I checked it right away, mainly because I wanted to know if Ellie had any equipment or items, which she doesn't. I was also wondering what happened to all those pills I invested in Joel -- Despite the narrative implication that Joel was dead, my gamer-brain still wanted to know where all my cool stats went. Did they carry over to Ellie somehow? Maybe she drank his blood, or ate his brains? But apparently not. So, while addressing these practical concerns, I found the lore items in her backpack.

During my first playthrough, I missed all the optional joke-book dialogues with Ellie. I was busy looking around, and didn't notice her standing there, with a book in her hand and a triangle over her head. So the joke books in her bookbag didn't make much sense to me.

"You gotta be kitten me." Her sense of humor really is dogshit.

While they were at the power plant, Ellie evidently stole the photo of Joel and Sarah. When you look at it in her backpack, Ellie says, "I should have given this to you when I had the chance." Ahh!!! What!?? Joel's dead!! He's definitely dead!!! I admit, the first time I heard that dialogue, it really freaked me out.

I love playing as Ellie. It feels mostly the same, but melee combat is much different. She can't attack people head on, without absorbing some counter-blows. But if she gets an enemy from behind, her "leap on the back with a knife" attack takes them the fuck out. Unfortunately, that makes a quiet kill out of the question. It's a nice little shake up of the regular mechanics.

Note: My opinion that "I love playing as Ellie" will be sorely tested by the Bloater fight on Grounded Difficulty, as we will soon see.

The Deer Hunt

This damn deer -- On my first playthrough, I killed it with no problem. On my second playthrough, I tried to fudge things by just chasing the deer. I figured I'd get to where I was going eventually. But it turns out that you'll just chase the deer in circles, forever.

After that, for some reason, I always had a real hard time killing this thing. I'm not sure why; maybe I'm just not patient enough. But this part is always a weird pain in the ass for me now.

I've never been a great fan of this bow. The firing arc of it feels light. My uncle John is a bow hunter, and his bow didn't seem to travel in a leisurely arc like this one does. Bows are fucking powerful. John once showed me a slow-motion video of an arrow passing right through a deer, and embedding itself in the ground. He's real into hunting, that guy. I've never fired a bow myself, but in reality, bows seem to fire with a lot more force than this.

My first arrow misses, but my second hits ol' Deerface. My stray arrow is sitting in the snow, so I pick it up. All super-apocalypse rules are officially suspended, until I get past the Bloater. This section of the game is already a kick in the balls on Survivor difficulty, and Ellie's melee abilities are very compromised. So I don't think any self-imposed, super-hard rules are necessary. Once I get to the lakeside, I'll go back to minimalism.

I tag the deer really easily this time. I was clearly just being impatient before. The curse is broken! Yeah! Fuck you, deer!

David

Ellie chases the deer into an abandoned settlement, where she meets David and James, who are members of a nearby community. She agrees to trade the deer for antibiotics, which James leaves to procure.

David is voiced by Nolan North, who is also the voice of Nathan Drake. I had no idea, and neither did anyone else. Nolan North really is good. I watched a compilation of his roles on YouTube, and it's pretty impressive. These days he's known for the ubiquity of his "Nathan Drake" voice, but in his earlier career, he did whatever weird voice or accent was needed, and pulled them off really well.

Now that I know more about David, I try to imagine what he was thinking as he happened across a fourteen year old girl, alone in the woods. His hebephile heart must have skipped a beat.

I like how untrusting Ellie is. Being alone, in the winter, with a nearly dead man stowed away in a basement, this must be a terrifying time in her life. The long nights of being in that house, hoping that Joel won't die, and hoping that no one finds them... it must be brutal. Maybe she even has some temptation to see if David's group is on the level, just to remove the pressure of solo-survival.

But I guess Ellie's seen more than enough bullshit to cause her not to trust people. The entire city of Pittsburgh, for example, was a giant shit-show. Even at the university, she and Joel were attacked, seemingly out of nowhere. You know what, I take it back. Of course she wouldn't go with these randoms. Fuck 'em. Everybody who doesn't live near a dam fucking sucks.

And even Tommy's group was initially threatening. In fact, David's kind demeanor probably gives him away more than anything else. In this world, being nice is completely incongruous.

This is gonna come up again, but it seems like David runs his village with a fairly iron grip. James has gotta know that Ellie is likely responsible for the massacre at the University, the same as David does. But he only hesitates for a second before following David's orders.

Style

There's a sort of oil-paint look to the character's faces, which I didn't really notice before. It's very evident on close ups of David. This game doesn't quite have a fully-real-

istic style, but it's not a cartoony style, either. The mix works better than an attempt at photo-realism would.

The facial expressions in this game really astound me. God damn, I like this game. Did I mention that? I like it so damn much.

Battle At The Old Mill (Get Some Cider)

So we're trying to have a nice, creepy talk, when Infected attack from everywhere! Shit! These sudden zombie-attacks are sometimes a little suspect, but I've seen worse. The Walking Dead: Season 2, for example. In that game, it seemed like the USDA was air-dropping zombies into zombie-free areas to help everybody get killed.

In all zombie fiction, walking-dead-attacks eventually become somewhat metaphorical. Are the characters getting a little complacent? Fire up a zombie attack!! Oh, shit!

At the beginning of this fight, David covers the deer with a tarp. That's a little detail I hadn't noticed before. I guess he doesn't want the food to get splattered with Infected blood. Good thinking, Cap'n Creepo.

Ellie has a little knife icon, down in the bottom right corner of the screen. Aww! Adorable. Incidentally, have you ever noticed that when a girl calls something "cute", she just means "small"? It's true -- The next time a girl says an inanimate object is cute, I can almost guarantee she will be referring to a smaller version of a normally larger object.

It takes three tries for me to remember which button is the reload button. It's been awhile. Just out of curiosity, I try using Ellie's melee attack. It actually works surprisingly well -- If David shoots an Infected, Ellie can take them out with a stab. And of course, getting an enemy from behind is golden. But if it goes wrong even once, 3/4 of her health can be gone immediately.

Fuck it; lemme try it ammo-less a few times. I don't know what I'm trying to prove here. I've just become a bit addicted to finding ways to worm my way through this game without using guns.

At first I'm waiting for David to shoot the intruding Infected, but there's a really small window of opportunity for Ellie to stab them. Instead, I start using David as bait. I run away, and let the Infected attack him. Then while he's getting his face bit off, I jump on their back and get stabbing!

I make it through the first wave! "You're a better shot with that thing than me," David says. Nice try at flattery, Dave. But I didn't use any bullets! Your compliment is insincere!

Wave two is a little too much. There are like four Infected in the room at once, and one of them's a Clicker. If I was playing as Joel, I might spend all night trying to beat this section with my fists, like the idiot that I am. But Ellie just doesn't have the melee power. I'm still pretty proud I made it through that first wave unscathed. But now, it's gun-time.

It's fun to pull out a gun again. Take these bullets, you zombie fucks! My initial instinct is to stay away from the cabin windows, but it's a lot easier to stand next to the windows and shoot zombies in the face as they clamber inside. My weird melee training is coming in handy: I shoot the first two Infected, but kill the next three with melee attacks. I even manage to get a Clicker, as it tries to eat David's face. Not bad.

Damn though -- There are a fuck ton of Infected here. I bet it wouldn't be as bad if I hadn't let that first wave break all the boards as they crawled through the windows.

It literally takes me a moment to remember how to pick up the ammo off a corpse. Triangle. It's triangle, man. Dammit. This super apocalypse has really rattled my brain.

It takes a few tries, but I make it through wave two unscathed, and with one more bullet than I started with. Up to 8 from 7! But then I have to use it to shoot a Clicker, so back down to 7. For the record, I also have 9 arrows. I seem to have an empty pistol, as well.

Sneaking Through The Old Mill (Get Some Cider)

I forgot that there's a stealth section before the Bloater standoff. I run through the first part, and then David boosts me up to get a ladder. I lead a Clicker on a little goose chase, and get past him without picking up the nearby brick. Post Traumatic Super Apocalypse Joel would be proud of me.

The Bloater Standoff

We arrive at the dreaded Bloater Battle. I call it that, but the Bloater's not the real problem. The fifty million assholes before the Bloater are the major issue.

"It's a dead end," David says. "How on earth did they use this building?"

Is that an attempt to explain away the gameyness of this level layout? You know, it's probably better just not to mention it. DAVID.

The Mind Of Freeman

There's a YouTube series called "The Mind Of Freeman" where a guy overdubs all of Gordon Freeman's thoughts. It's pretty great. "How did people work here? It's a bunch of containers suspended over a bottomless pit!" He's got a point, man.

Super-Apocalypse Suspended

As I mentioned, I'm gonna play this standoff totally straight. I'll pick up items, craft stuff, the works. But I've definitely acquired some new skills: My first time attempting this section on Survivor difficulty, it must have taken me an hour. Maybe more. It was ridiculous. I had to memorize how every enemy entered the room, until I had the whole thing meticulously planned out.

This time, I fuck around a lot, playing kinda sloppily and dying a few times. But it's ultimately no big deal. I definitely think one hallmark of good game design is that there's a large ceiling for potential player improvement. Initially, fights in The Last of Us can seem chaotic and haphazard. But in reality, there is a carefully designed set of rules. Everything is laid out; you've just gotta learn how it all works.

In the end, I still have a molotov in my inventory that I didn't even use. I probably coulda been a bit more careful, as I'm down to 2/5 health. But let's let it roll, and see what happens. Maybe the Health Gods will give me a life boost before the next section.

Grounded Mode Update!

Ugh. Just, fucking... whatttt. I only had access to a PS4 for a couple of days, so I was under the gun to try to beat Grounded difficulty while I could. This fight is where I got the most stuck. I played it all stupid night, until I was about ready to tear my own eyeballs out.

So I slept on it. I was on my last day with the PS4, so I had to do this. Even with my brain whirring all night, trying to solve this horrifying murder-puzzle, it still took me another forty minutes. That's a tough fucking fight, man.

Between Ellie's stab only being available against prone enemies, and how ludicrously

long is takes her to yank her knife back out... Fuck. This shit was hard, dude. I guess I don't have anything more to say than that. Just that Grounded Mode is mad, stupid hard.

King Kong Bloater

I wonder how that Bloater got on the roof? The gym Bloater was pretty well explained, by the spore filled equipment room. The hotel basement and university dorm were both filled with crazy fungus. Maybe this Bloater was holed up in one of the nearby buildings. But that doesn't explain how he got on the dang roof.

However, it took me four playthroughs to start wondering about that, because I'm always too busy shitting myself. So, I guess it doesn't really matter.

David's Heel Turn

During the post-battle cutscene, David reveals that the group at the university were his men, "killed by a crazy man, and a little girl." This scene is so fucking good. That reveal, and the way David delivers it, totally blew my mind. If there was an Academy Award for Best Video Game Scene Of 2013, this has gotta be the winner. It's so well presented, and gives such a great window into how the world at large perceives Joel.

Yeah, David's men attacked first. They're opportunistic, and aren't above murder. But there's something about being part of a group, especially a group that has women and children to look after, which makes their violence seem more normalized. Joel, on the other hand... He's just a crazy man. A crazy man with a girl, a nearly-lone psycho crossing the country.

David's view of Joel is a big nod toward how the story will eventually resolve. Everyone in this world has done terrible things, but they're all trying to maintain a social fabric of one stripe or another. Joel is looking out for himself, and his anti-social brand of murdering does not go unremarked.

The Weight Of Murder

In Uncharted 2, Lezarovich comments on how many people Nathan Drake has killed. It's amusing that he noticed, but it's ultimately a throw away line. It doesn't really matter how many people Drake has killed, because it's understood that Drake's violence is in the vein of a 1980s action movie. It's included for the entertainment of an audience, and doesn't mean much beyond that.

In *The Last Of Us*, murder matters. The frequency of Joel's murders are inflated, in order to service the mechanical needs of a video game. But the disparity between gameplay and storyline is much smaller here than it is in most games.

The state of the world goes a certain distance toward justifying Joel's actions. As mentioned, almost everyone we meet is a murderer, of one variety or another. But to these different groups, Joel's place in the social order is much lower than them. He's not killing for a cause, or in support of any particular community. Joel is only looking out for himself.

While the ending of the game can seem initially shocking, the seeds of Joel's extreme self-interest are planted throughout. When the idea of a community effort, or a notion of "the greater good" bumps up against Joel's own wants and needs, there is no question about which side Joel will take. He's always been out for himself. In the eyes of the world at large, he's just "a crazy man, with a little girl."

We'll Stroll To The Edge Of The World

David has designs to rescue Ellie from this crazy man. Ellie is strong, capable, young and female. If you're trying to maintain a fledgling society, that's a powerful index of compatibility. And since you live in a lawless nightmare world where you might die tomorrow, why not get a little creepy with it? Eh, Dave? Eh, creypo?

David's desire to possess Ellie is ultimately what does him in. When it becomes apparent that Ellie can't be controlled, he should cut ties. Trying to hang on to his new "pet" is a huge mistake. But it is a believable character motivation. We've all done ridiculous things for love and lust. I did something dumb under that impetus, like, last week.

In my case, it concerned another adult. But David's attraction to young people must drive him even more strongly. Meeting Ellie must seem a rare opportunity. I'm sure fourteen year olds aren't just falling out of the sky. Man; there is no good way to talk about David without feeling weird.

As mentioned, ol' creepy Dave must yield considerable power within his group. His community know that this girl was partially responsible for killing a bunch of their people. That's a huge pill for them to swallow. But they allow it, at least initially. As soft spoken as he is, David definitely holds some sway.

A Basement On The Hill

Ellie flees on horseback, taking her antibiotics to an abandoned neighborhood, where Joel is hidden in a basement. She leaves a trail for David's group to follow, and I guess that could be an easy thing to forget about. I'm not even sure how you'd avoid leaving a trail, particularly on horseback. Maybe she doesn't expect to be followed. She might think her dealings with David are done.

According to David, it's been a few weeks since he sent his men to the university. So it could be upwards of a month that Joel's been in torpor. Ellie administers the antibiotics, and we see how Ellie has sewn up Joel's wound. It looks brutal, but it's amazing that she managed that.

Laid out on that basement floor, Joel sure looks bad. The shot from above, of Ellie lying on the floor next to Joel, is one of my favorite moments. Even before meeting David, being alone in this little town must have been scary. The calm quietness of an empty world, looking after a person who may not survive... that's pretty terrifying.

Ellie is featured in the foreground of the box cover, and I read that Naughty Dog got a little pressure to put Joel front-and-center. But it's cool that Ellie is presented as the main character, because she definitely is. This story is also about Joel, but if there's a hero to be had in this fucked up tale, Ellie's the one.

As for sleeping on the floor, I can't sign off on that. As I write this, I've recently moved into a basement apartment, and basements are really cold, man. Is it really necessary to keep Joel down here, on that cold floor? If someone did find the two of them, how are they going to escape from a basement?

I guess Ellie wants to stay extra-hidden, and moving Joel to a higher floor could injure him. But maybe keeping Joel in one of the nice, comfy beds upstairs wouldn't have been so bad.

The Goon Squad Discovers Ellie

The next morning, Ellie wakes to find that David's goons have tracked her down! She tells Joel she's gonna lead them away, and Joel doesn't respond, still being functionally unconscious.

If this were a regular game (ie: "a shitty game"), this moment would be a great opportunity for Joel to croak the word, "Ellie..." Or, if they wanted to attain a level of super-shittiness, he could quietly utter: "...Sarah..."

I bet there are a bunch of game writers who would say, "What's wrong with that? That'd be sweet! Imagine the poignancy!" God bless Naughty Dog for knowing how not to suck.

Ellie escapes on horseback, but one of the goons shoots the horse. Ellie has to run for an abandoned house by the lakeshore. Rest in peace, horsey. I hardly knew ye. Its name was "Callus", incidentally. But I did get my full health restored, so that's nice.

The Lakeshore Cabins

During my first playthrough, my understanding of the combat mechanics met perfectly with this lakeside battle. I finally felt like I really understood what was going on, and playing through this area was super fun. I was on top of things, planning and scheming, rather than just reacting desperately.

Upon replaying, this fight is actually kind of easy. But in some ways, it's the most realistic feeling encounter. Ellie's inability to melee enemies from the front forces the player to approach the situation stealthily, and the old cabins give her a lot of hiding places.

Under these conditions, Ellie's terrorism-style attacks make the encounter feel surprisingly believable. She's less physically capable than Joel, but she can take a shot here, run over there, stab somebody, run somewhere else. These virtual murderers don't feel as harrowing as usual; in this section, the cat-and-mouse game is fun.

The enemy AI is easier to trick here than usual. But they're doing their best, the scamps. The enemies are scattered and disorganized; once they lose track of Ellie, she can show up almost anywhere. But if the enemies were to stay together, she might escape altogether. So being spread out and confused may be the best they can manage. Not to mention that these aren't soldiers, or even Hunters -- They're just a bunch of cannibal assholes.

Enemies generally stick to their prescribed zones, particularly toward the end of the level. They're trying to keep the player from making a straight rabbit run for the exit. To escape, Ellie has to creep slowly along a small ledge. If there are any nearby enemies left alive, they'll then take her out.

The Last Of Us really is a weird mix of open and closed. A lot of times, you can approach a situation however you want: Go in guns blazing, try stealth, or just run past. But that openness occasionally funnels down to a point of forced conflict. I don't think that's a good or bad thing; it's just a thing. It's how Naughty Dog rolls.

Man, I do love this part. Running between the houses, leaping through windows -- How would these enemies ever find this girl? They can never pinpoint exactly where she is, until suddenly there's a knife in their neck. It's so good. If this were a PS1-era game that involved nothing but a series of cabin-battles, I'd play it all day.

Another Slice From A Naughty Dog Game That I Would Have Played Endlessly As A Stand-Alone Game In 1997

Remember that truck jumping sequence from Uncharted 2? That could definitely have been its own game. It could have been called "Truck Jumper", and could have been one of those PS1 games with no real story. Just a fun mechanic, and jaggy graphics. "Truck Jumper", in a double pack with "Courier Crisis", from GT Interactive. Good times on the NASDAQ all around.

Lack Of Listen Mode

As I've mentioned, this game really does benefit from turning off the listen ability. Spotting enemies who are walking across the frozen landscape, then maneuvering carefully around them, feels really cool. The lack of listen-magic makes keeping tabs on the enemies much more exciting and tense.

This cabin-battle situation is a little unusual for The Last Of Us, as it's the only time you arguably have the upper hand. It's your situation to lose. Here, removing listen-mode helps the player feel more ensconced in the surroundings. You really feel present in the snow, or under the trees, or crouched in an old cabin with its windows blown out. The only thing cooler might have been if this fight were at night. Ellie would seem like an avenging demon, popping out of nowhere and scaring the shit out of everybody.

Lack of Listen Mode also keeps the game moving at a much quicker and more fluid pace. When you have the Listen ability, it's hard to resist activating it, which changes the flow of combat. I'm just gonna say it: Listen Mode sucks. Playing with it turned off is way, way better.

The Lakeshore Encounter (The Super Apocalypse Resumes)

5/5 health
7 rifle bullets
0 arrows
0 9mm bullets
1 molotov
1 rag
1 unit alcohol

Now that the winterfresh Bloater is out of the way, I'm going back to super-apocalypse rules. No more picking stuff up, miss greedy-fingers! Let's see if this can be done melee-only. David's grip over his people may not be so massive after all, since the first two guys in this area are talking, and basically say "Screw David". They've got no interest in taking me alive. They're fixin' to murderize me.

In the flow of the encounter, I end up hiding behind the bathroom building at the far corner of the map. While I'm crouched there, I see snow fall from one of the trees. How is there still shit happening in this game that I haven't noticed before? Then some dickheads interrupt my nice moment, and I have to take care of them. When Ellie leaps on a guy and stabs the shit out of him, it is really fucking brutal. I guess they've gotta sell the idea that a smaller person can drop a bigger person, and boy howdy, they sure do.

As I mentioned, I traditionally found this to be one of the easier encounters. But this time, it's really tough. Apparently a huge part of my strategy involved picking people off from a distance with the hunting rifle, then running away to hide. Trying to get close enough to kill these guys is rough. I might have to be less killy than I intended, and just try to sneak by.

I'm hiding behind the bathroom building again, and I see a dude inside. I slip in the window and dive on him, and as he thrashes around, his blood sprays all over one of the white bathroom doors. Holy shit, that's fucking gross. This level is the best.

Playing heavy-melee with Ellie is not as fun as it is with Joel. Using the medium of Joel's fists, there's a surprising amount of finesse possible. Finding different ways to punch people turns into its own kind of game, albeit a narrow and ridiculous one. But since sneaky backstabs are pretty much all Ellie has in her arsenal, combat becomes much more laborious.

I manage to catch one guy during his "shock" animation, and Ellie stabs him from the

front as though she had caught him from behind. She leaps right at that dick and starts stabbing. That's another little thing I never saw before. A brand new type of murder!

The Long Winter Of Doubt

I'm not gonna lie to you, I'm starting to get pretty demoralized by this encounter. Approaching it melee-only is goddamn ridiculous. But I manage one run where I sneak along the shore, and happen to catch the exit-guards on the far end of their patrol. So I run for the exit, and only take one point of damage as they fire at me. I get out of there without killing a single person. Not my usual level of terrorism, but good enough for me.

Sitting In Nature aka Super High Fidelity Virtual Reality

Now that combat is over, I can take a moment to admire this lake. Goddamn, it looks beautiful. Video game versions of the physical world are one of my favorite things. They really help me appreciate the Earth in a way that's hard to see otherwise. It works when I'm playing a video game and thinking about nature, or when I'm in nature, thinking about a video game. The two versions of reality intertwine in my mind. Not all the time, I'm not completely crazy. But, sometimes.

A couple summers ago, I took a bicycle out to a gorgeous part of Toronto called Humber Bay. I was sitting on some huge rocks, looking out at lake Ontario, and it was awesome. The sun was sparkling across the water, boats were sailing by, it looked incredible. But looking at that scene, I had the distinct feeling that I was sitting inside Far Cry 3. I felt like I could swim out, get a boat, and go hunting for a shark.

It might seem strange to superimpose video games over real life. But having that different framework to apply to the experience doesn't make me feel removed from it. Instead, it can oddly make that experience seem more vivid. If I hadn't associated that day so strongly with Far Cry 3, I don't know if I would remember it now.

Living in Canada, there are fairly frequent opportunities to be near frozen lakes. Maybe next time I'm in that situation, surrounded by the majestic glory of nature, my mind will go to this frozen scene from The Last Of Us. If it does, in my weird, video-game addled mind, I guarantee the association will make the moment feel more significant.

For me, a video game pays tribute to the beauty of a frozen lake, and a frozen lake pays tribute to the beauty of a video game. It's zero/one zen. Whoah! Either that, or my mom was big-time right when she said I played too many video games. But as long as I don't

shoot anybody with a harpoon gun, I'm sure it's a fairly harmless affectation.

Captured By David

Back to combat! I sneak Ellie past some more cannibal dudes, and climb into a chalet. I go through a lower window than the higher one I normally use. I didn't know there were multiple entry points. Cool.

Maybe next time I'm in a chalet, I'll think of this chalet from a video game and blah blah blah. Really though, I might.

At the exit door, Ellie gets captured by David, and put into the friendliest of sleeper-holds. She wakes up in a cell, where she sees James chopping up a person. I guess I spoiled it already, but: Cannibals!

The Last Of Us has pretty good cannibals, writing-wise. It makes sense why this community would resort to eating people, being resource-starved as they are. Cannibalism isn't used strictly for shock value, as is so often the case with fictional human-eaters.

"You've been out for quite some time," David says. "Long enough for your crazy friend to heal completely." Or something along those lines.

This is where we officially learn about David's hebephile tendencies, as he touches Ellie's hand, and calls her "special". Is hebephile the right word? There are a few gradations of child sex-predator, but people tend to jump straight to pedophile. I don't think David would have impure thoughts working at, say, a pre-school. But he'd have a hell of a time being a junior high school math teacher. Again, I'm sure I'm making this creepier than it has to be.

In response to David's icky tenderness, Ellie snaps his finger! Prong! And he's *still* trying to facilitate her integration into the group. "You are making it very difficult to keep you alive. What am I supposed to tell the others now?" Come on, dude. Give it up. If she broke your finger, she's gonna slit your throat when she has the chance. Even in an apocalypse scenario, the honeymoon is over once the finger-breaking starts.

David leaves Ellie in her cell, insinuating that in the morning, he's gonna chop her up. I guess the honeymoon's over after all.

Endless Fandom

While we wait for Joel to revive, let's chat a bit about the inspiration behind writing this epic tome.

I've always written a lot, but never managed to bring a long project to completion. That was part of the inspiration behind writing this book: I wanted to try to strengthen my writing habits, by working on something less abstract than a novel. Writing about *The Last Of Us* gave me a solid foundation, which helped me build a stronger daily writing routine.

It took me about two years to finish this book. Doing final edits and preparing the book for release, I'm getting closer to three years. But it occurred to me this morning how, even after all this time, I'm still not tired of writing about *The Last Of Us*. How crazy is that? Goddamn, *The Last Of Us* is good.

My personality type is fairly angular; I tend to split artwork into two distinct camps -- The few things that I like, and the rest, which I kinda hate. You probably know a few people like me. I think the clinical term is "annoying".

When I like something, I tend to *really* like it. But even taking that into account, the depth of my interest in *The Last Of Us* seems pretty amazing. What other game could I happily spend this amount of time dissecting? Off the top of my head, only *Star Control II* comes to mind. If you've never played *Star Control II*, it truly is that good. But besides that... beats me. *The Last Of Us* really is one in a million.

There's so much to discuss in *The Last Of Us* that, despite its length, I don't feel like this book is remotely exhaustive. It only chronicles my own experience; there's plenty of material for other people to write their own books on the subject. So, there's the scoop: Writer of enormous book *likes* *The Last Of Us*. You heard it here first! Ah, the happiness... what could possibly go wrong?

Uncharted 4

So during the writing of this book, *Uncharted 4* was released. Fucking *Uncharted 4*. I'm really struggling to decide how I'm gonna discuss this boring-ass game. Your best bet would be to Google "Uncharted 4 is boring", where you'll find many in-depth posts, which mirror my thoughts about why *Uncharted 4* feels like such a lifeless, zombie-version of an *Uncharted* game.

But I will write about *Uncharted 4* a bit, because it has direct structural ties to *The Last*

Of Us. Throughout this book, my implication has been that The Last Of Us is a near-flawless gem, and that other games would do well to follow in its magical footsteps. But Uncharted 4 went astray precisely *because* it followed in those footsteps. Had The Last Of Us not been a success, I'm sure no one would have suggested that Naughty Dog make a double-length, quarter-speed Uncharted game.

One of my favorite elements of The Last Of Us is how its design and storytelling intertwine; its slower pace and frequent downtime help to accentuate the story being told. I've realized, in hindsight, that the Uncharted series did the same -- Uncharted's quick pace and frequent shifts in gameplay mirror Nathan Drake's personality. Drake's mind is filled with adventure. He's the kind of person who will jump from every cliff, and his very lack of hesitation is what ensures his survival. The spirit of adventure lives inside that man, and combining that spirit with the movie-like pace of the Uncharted games compelled me in a way that adventure movies never could.

The importance of Uncharted's quick pace has become starkly apparent, now that it's been taken away. Straley and Druckmann gave a talk at the Game Developer's Conference about the importance of pacing in Uncharted 2 -- They explained how the team strove to continually change the game's playstyle, in order to keep the player engaged.

"The hope is to move the game at such a clip, players have the controller in their hand, and they don't want to put it down until the game is done."

"What we don't want to do is this, right? Any kind of repetition, whether it's in gameplay, story, setting, anything throughout the game. The law of diminishing returns: Repeating actions are gonna lose their interest, and then we get pacing that becomes repetitious, and boring."

Those are direct quotes from Druckmann's GDC talk. Straley and Druckmann talked at great length, and with great pride, about the pacing of Uncharted 2. The success of The Last Of Us seems to have derailed their perception of the value and strength of the Uncharted series, because that quick-paced philosophy is utterly absent in Uncharted 4. Uncharted 4 has occasional spikes of the old Uncharted feeling, but they are very few and far between.

I hate to be so negative about a game by the Last Of Us team, as this book is basically one long love-letter to them. I decided to couch this Uncharted 4 section next to the previous, enormously positive section, because I wanted it to remain clear how much I respect this team, and all that they've accomplished.

It should also be noted that Uncharted 4 changed hands mid-development, after the departure of previous writer Amy Hennig. The final Uncharted 4 did not have a proper

pre-production cycle, and was behind its deadline from moment one. It is clearly a product of great compromise, and the decision to

Aargh! Fuck! Fuck this! I hate writing about this! I hate trying to be diplomatic about this goddamn disaster! I know I'm in the minority about Uncharted 4, but for me, the propulsive feeling of the previous games was completely gone. It instead felt like I was dragging a weight, lurching slowly from scene to scene. To cut to the chase, let's use a term I saw in an online criticism of Uncharted 4: "Low-quality downtime." If the pace of the series is going to be slowed down, and if the time spent traversing locations with a partner is going to be exponentially increased, there needs to be a tangible storytelling benefit to that increased downtime.

The Last Of Us uses its downtime to great effect, allowing us to learn about its world and characters. Uncharted 4 does not confer even remotely those same benefits. We're told that Nathan is trying to move away from adventuring, but we're never given a compelling reason as to why. Nathan Drake's veins are *fueled* by adventure. That is his primary character trait. But we're expected to accept, as a given, that he would want to move away from that kind of life. Is it because of his wife? His wife the documentarian adventurer, who he met while adventuring? That's not even close to a reasonable explanation. If the entire premise of the series is going to be changed, it deserves a far more extensive clarification than it gets.

We're told that Sam has spent over a decade in prison, but nothing in his demeanor suggests a man who has lost a decade of his life to imprisonment. When asked about his time inside, the best he can offer is that he read some books. Some books about the very treasure the team is currently seeking. It's like he has the words "plot device" stamped right on his forehead. It's rare that anything interesting comes out of Sam's mouth; in a series full of memorable characters, Sam Drake has cartoonishly little personality. I can't tell you a thing about him, besides that he smokes, and that he likes treasure.

We're told that Sam is Nathan's brother, but nothing in the dynamic between the two suggests brotherhood. We spend hours in Sam's company, and each interaction is an opportunity to examine the relationship between the two men. But where The Last Of Us feels like an endless font of character information, Uncharted 4 contains almost none. If instead of being Nathan's brother, Sully had said, "Hey, I know a guy," the vast majority of Sam's dialogue and interactions could have remained completely unchanged.

I really wonder if Druckmann or co-writer Josh Scherr have brothers, because nothing about the Sam/Nathan dynamic rings even remotely true to me. I have an estranged brother; if this story had *anything at all* to tell me about brotherhood, I'd be all ears. I'm keenly interested in the topic. But if those two are brothers, then I'll fuck a monkey's uncle.

I could go on, but those strike me as the biggest problems: Nathan the adventurer is having to be dragged into adventuring, and Sam the imprisoned brother acts nothing like... anything. The fast pace of the previous games has been abandoned, the bright-eyed excitement of the characters gone, and for what? There's nothing *there*, guys. There's only hour after hour of low-quality downtime. Rather than learning more about the Uncharted characters, I feel like the kinship I used to feel for them has actually been diminished.

Uncharted 4 is heralded as a more "mature" entry in the series, but I would strongly disagree with that sentiment. The writing in Uncharted 4 is more rote, and far cornier than in any previous installment. The dialogue in Uncharted games used to *shine*. It stood out clearly, in a field where witty dialogue and genuine humor is a rare commodity. I felt excited to keep playing each game, just to hear what the characters would say to each other next.

The overlong levels of Uncharted 4 feel longer still, because the dialogue in Uncharted 4 is not funny. Maybe there's nothing this team can do about that; humor is tough, and you've either got it, or you don't. But it's important to know your weaknesses. You can't just break out The Big Book Of Dad Jokes, and expect that to stand alongside what had been one of the best-written series in gaming. Uncharted dialogue is supposed to make me crack a grin, not to roll my eyes.

The plot of Uncharted games has always been disjointed, and the overall story maintains a status quo which, by Uncharted 3, did become somewhat disappointing. But the moment-to-moment interactions have always been great. They've *sparkled*. I don't think there's anything immature about how those games were presented. There's nothing immature about excitement. There's nothing immature about adventure. If the series is going to be re-structured into a slow museum piece, under the auspices of conveying additional insight about its characters, then it needs to *convey that insight*. It needs to *have something to say*. The spirit of the series shouldn't be gutted, in service of a character drama which utterly fails to develop.

There's one big, dramatic moment in Uncharted 4: When Rafe reveals that Sam actually escaped prison years before, and has been blatantly lying to everyone around him. That would have been a good time for Nathan to finally question his relationship with his brother. That would have been a good time for some dramatic tension, or some character conflict. That would have been a good time for *anything at all to happen*. Instead, Nathan forgives Sam in *the very next scene*. For christ's sake, guys. *Fuck. Me.* I hate writing about this game. I wanna go kick a building down.

Uncharted 4 does look very pretty, though.

Joel Revives

Back in The Last Of Us world, and back in the basement, Joel comes to. I don't know shit about medicine, but I'm guessing the speed with which he recovers is story-magic. The game is non-specific about how long Ellie is unconscious in David's cell, but it can't have been more than a day or two. So getting Joel on his feet and back up to his mechanical best is definitely a bit of a wave of the witch's wand. And if that's not a saying, then it is now.

The camera sways a lot, and it's funny to think of older games, where two stiff characters gesturing in a static environment was considered the height of storytelling. Graphics and processing power have obviously gotten better, but it's little touches, like camera movements, that really help modern games feel more immersive.

Now that Joel's back in action, let's take stock of what's in his backpack.

- 3/5 health
- 12 revolver bullets
- 6 shotgun shells
- 1 health kit
- 1 nail bomb

The 9mm is gone, so I guess that's where Ellie got her gun.

Only having 3/5 health is a bit of an unexpected kick in the dick. I guess that represents the healing that Joel has yet to do. The stab-wound area of his clothing is caked in blood, which is pretty gross. He has a hand on his abdomen, and a sad look on his face. Sell that injury, J.

Joel climbs the stairs and pulls open the garage door. The snowy day outside is beautiful. The way the lighting changes, going from the dimly lit basement to the bright outdoors, is really great.

Joel calls out for Ellie, but gets greeted by a bullet instead! Whoah! And Joel's back to full mobility! Must be the adrenaline.

It mighta been cool to make Joel behave more obviously injured throughout this section. Say, for this chapter, he couldn't run. Maybe his aiming stats could be worse, and his choke could take longer. As it stands, he really is fully back to normal.

Incidentally, Uncharted 4 featured a short section with an injured Nate. Climbing became much more difficult, as the player could no longer leap between handholds. I

really liked it, and count it among the very few sections of that game that I wish had been a little longer.

The Reverse Metroid

As a player, I tend to be more interested in playing as a de-powered character, than I am as an over-powered one. In fact, I'm a little suspicious of players who don't grow tired of video game power-fantasies; what is your day-to-day like, that you never get bored of effortlessly blowing everybody up in a video game? I'm no psychologist, but that seems like some Napoleon-complex bullshit.

Video games do not often bank on disempowerment as a central mechanic. Even famously difficult games are usually easier by the end than they are at the beginning. Hence, the Reverse Metroid.

The Reverse Metroid is a game concept I heard from podcaster Anthony Gallegos, which I think is pretty brilliant. Instead of a game slowly doling out equipment upgrades, such as a Metroid game does, wouldn't it be cool if the game instead took those upgrades away? At key points, your armor could become damaged, and you'd have to choose an ability to jettison. The game would become fundamentally more difficult, as the player is left with fewer and fewer powers to draw from.

Theoretically, a player should be getting better at a game's basic mechanics the more they play. They should be less reliant on fancy items, as their core gameplay-chops take center stage. By the end of a Reverse Metroid, the player would be hanging by a thread, almost totally de-powered, while still having to survive against end-of-game odds.

Dammit, that sounds cool. If you managed to stagger across the finish line of a game like that, you'd feel like The Wizard playing Starfighter. It's exactly counter to conventional game design wisdom. But conventional wisdom is nothing if not boring. I think a Reverse Metroid could be a really great experience.

Joel vs The Neighborhood Watch

ALL FUCKING RIGHT! Back to fightin'! I'm trying to make my way through the snowy neighborhood, while being shot at by David's goons. I take a bullet in the side, so I stop, to let the guy finish me off. I'm already starting at 3/5 health, so I wanna make it through this section without taking any damage.

The guy shoots at my head, and Joel automatically flinches out of the way. That's kinda

cool. He shoots again, and Joel dodges again. Come on, Joel. I'm trying to die, here. Finally, the guy just punches the shit out of Joel's face, and that does the trick.

This is a bit of a weird fight, since the bad guys are basically running from you. When you hit certain points, the enemies will fall back, trying to funnel Joel into a trap. You've gotta get close enough for the enemies to run off, but as previously discussed, running toward anyone with a gun is the #1 most dangerous thing you can ever do. So it's a little tricky to manage with only the old soup bones.

In fact, I'm gonna officially upgrade this section to "pain in the neck". I have to find the exact right path, and travel at the exact right speed, in order for everything to line up properly. If I move too fast, I get shot. If I move too slowly, enemies will take up positions that they refuse to budge from. One guy in particular stands on the dumpster behind one of the houses, and just waits there. Normally, I could shoot him, or throw something. But here, I can't. So for me, that guy is a real problem. I have to crowd in on that dumpster quickly, to cause him to run off before he can climb up and completely wreck my shit.

I do finally manage to make it all the way through, and man -- All this meta-gaming I'm doing, working my way around these systems for no actual reason -- It's just occurred to me yet again that this might be the dumbest book a person has ever written.

Grounded Mode Update!

On Grounded Mode, I run past these fools so quickly that they start to funnel in *behind* me. Once the Joel-being-grabbed scene triggers, all the enemies in my wake disappear. It's not as weird as causing Tommy to teleport, but it's still pretty weird.

Token Interactivity

The fancy trap these enemies were leading Joel into is just a couple of guys who grab him from behind. You then have to pound the square button to fight them off. If you don't, Joel gets stabbed, and the game resets to a few seconds before.

It's funny when little moments like this are interactive -- "Press square to prove that you're paying attention". The action required is minimal, and the price for failure is basically non-existent. It's token interactivity: I can have Joel choose to struggle, or choose not to struggle. But choosing not to struggle is not an option.

On the other hand, I don't really mind pressing the button. So once again, I have no

point.

The Torture Scene

Joel overpowers his attackers, who then wake up in the unfortunate position of being tied up in an abandoned house. At that point, Joel gets to torturing.

This torture scene is brutal. A lot of bad stuff happens in *The Last Of Us*, but this is one of the harshest. Here we see the realest Joel we've seen so far, where he displays not even a feigned consideration for the pain of others, and it's pretty fucking rough.

Again, this makes me think about the outside world's perception of Joel. If he were not the protagonist, it would be very hard to take his side, regardless of his circumstances. The way he stabs that one guy in the knee -- Fuck. I submit that I would not care to have that happen to me.

Cutscenes

One of my favorite aspects of *The Last Of Us* is how it marries cutscenes and gameplay, much more closely than the average game does. That being said, there is still a high level of abstraction involved. Individual encounters can feel fairly realistic, and it can seem somewhat believable that Joel might survive the situations he's put up against. However, at game's end, it's jarring to see that Joel has amassed over 600 kills. That is clearly well beyond reason -- Despite a veneer of realism, we're still dealing with a pretty heavy level of metaphor, here.

As such, actions that take place during gameplay can't be taken at full face value. As with most modern games, it's only the cutscenes that carry full narrative weight. A death that happens in a cutscene is a "for real" death. It's not in any way symbolic. Gameplay kills might be brushed aside when discussing a character arc, but cutscene kills are literal. They are deaths which definitively did happen, completely unadorned by any requirements of gameplay.

So not only is this torture scene inalienable from Joel's bad-guy resume, it's also one of the few times we get to see how Joel acts when he's alone. Without Tess to guide him, or Ellie's eyes watching him, he's free to be his pure self. And his pure self is a fucking psycho, who will kill you and your friend, and not give a single shit. This might be the guy who Tommy left behind, and hoped to never see again.

To be fair, Joel's victims were also intending to kill Joel, and would also have not given

a shit about it. But not everyone is popping off knee caps. If there was any question about the true nature of Joel's character, I think this scene gives the answer.

Torture Scenes in The Last Of Us vs Grand Theft Auto 5

That torture scene in Grand Theft Auto 5 sure was dumb, huh? It's hard to believe people expended so much energy at the time debating about it. It could be because the air came out of Grand Theft Auto 5 pretty quickly, and it became apparent that there wasn't much else to talk about. I would definitely be interested to see a book-length dissertation about Grand Theft Auto 5:

"Trevor arrives back in Michael's life, a shocking and world-altering event, the reveal of which has been slowly and meticulously paced. Narrative tension is at an all-time high; not just for GTA5, but for the series as a whole.

"Then, they go out and tattoo a dick on Lazlow's chest. Because, why not? Because fuck tension, and fuck narrative payoff. Fuck everything. Find 50 spaceship parts."

Grand Theft Auto 5 had a lotta dumb shit in it. The torture scene in specific was really silly. There was a little cartoon of a tooth being pulled out, while the guy being tortured kept uttering goofy one-liners. It was tonally bizarre, and very aimless.

Grand Theft Auto 5 was a fun game, and I had a really good time driving through the mountains. Or I did, when my neck wasn't spontaneously breaking, or my gas tank wasn't suddenly exploding. But the idea that GTA5 was a true narrative contender, in a year which included The Last Of Us, is ridiculous.

I realize I'm fighting a fight that is long-over. But it's never too late to get in one more last word! Grand Theft Auto 5, narratively, was a mess. And that's the bottom line, because some jerk dick writing an electronic book wrote words to that effect in said book. Mmm... Rolls off the tongue.

The Murder Scene

One of Joel's torture-victims refers to Ellie as "David's newest pet". So David has had girls before, and I assume he's not maintaining a harem. I get the impression that his previous pets are no longer around. That's spooky.

Joel gets torturee #2 to mark Ellie's location on a map, and I'm not sure where he got the

map from. But I guess Joel's been swiping maps this whole time, so it's not that weird for him to have it.

Both torturees have cooperated, but Joel doesn't care. As a finale, he snaps one guy's neck, then brings a pipe down on the other guy's head. For a split second, we see the pipe hit and the blood fly. There's a lot to be said for cutting away right before a moment of violence, but not cutting away has its own gross charm.

Ellie's Trenchant Mouth

Back at David's town, Ellie is taken from her cage, presumably to be chopped up for cannibal dinner. Is David really planning to kill her, or is he just trying to scare her? I guess we'll never know, because she gives David a bite, and tells him he's infected.

Infection Theory

Can Ellie's cordyceps infection spread to other people? Did she really infect David, or was she just saying whatever she could to freak him out?

If Ellie can infect others, she's gonna have some troubles in the future. I don't know how well accepted she'll be in Tommy's town, once people learn that she's carrying the infection. Eventually she's going to have to break from Joel, to learn how to stand on her own, in a spiritual way. But her independence might take on a more physical form when Tommy's group kicks her the fuck out.

I'm gonna guess that she's not infectious. Surely the cordyceps virus is rendered inert by being in her inhospitable body. Let's just google "is ellie infected" and see what happens...

I love how Google always knows what I'm talking about. This is why you're out of a job, Jeeves.

A guy on some message board mentioned that Marlene describes Ellie's infection as a "mutated" version of the virus. So the military scanners will still show Ellie as "infected", but her actual virus is likely a harmless strain. That's good enough for me.

This would be a perfect time for me to actually credit a source. But whatever, it's just some message board. I consider all information communal and non-proprietary. Re-release this book with your name on it instead of mine, I don't care. It's the Singularity -- We're all Jeeves, now.

Ellie Escapes

David and James look at Ellie's bite-mark, which gives them pause. That's enough time for Ellie to hack poor James with his own butchering knife! Aha! Eat that, James!

James falls to the floor, and we can presume he's dead by his tell-tale death-gurgle. Ellie runs from the room as David fires at her, grabbing her own knife on the way out. It's pretty lucky that her knife was sitting right there. And that's why it's her Official Lucky Knife.

Ellie leaps out a window, escaping into the maze of David's community. I love the way this snowstorm looks. Bloom lighting, I think they call it? It's cranked to the max here, and you can barely see anything. The visual works really well; growing up in god damned Canada, I've had days like this. I once walked two blocks in the wrong direction in downtown Toronto, because it was so stormy I literally couldn't tell which way I was going. I also forgot my name and gender. A lotta weird stuff can go down during a storm.

Instead of running away, if Ellie just hangs out near the window, David will show up and start shooting at her. Then he says, "Where you going, Ellie? This is my town!" and walks away. I took a point of damage from his gunfire, but it's worth it, for the *science*. So I'm at 4/5 health, with nothing but my knife.

Now that David has fucked off, I take a moment to ponder that window. It's really high up, on the 2nd floor. That's a mighty leap for Ellie to take. That's some Nathan Drake shit.

I find a health pack, but don't pick it up, because, ew. Then there's a big laundry cart that needs to be moved out of the way. It's like the carts old cartoon characters would use to escape from prison.

This confused me at first, because I thought I needed to use the cart to climb up onto something. It was pretty much the same situation as the cart in Pittsburgh: It only needed to be moved out of the way, but I was too dumb to realize that. This also proves that I am clinically incapable of learning.

I don't think the devs expected people to push that laundry cart around, because once you take it outside, it's sawft like balsa. It starts blowing around all crazy, like it has no weight.

Mutiny In Cannibal-Town

While sneaking around, David can be overheard telling his constituency that the escaped girl is infected, and to round up the women and children. The church bell starts ringing, and it sounds really cool. *La cloche juste!*

Others can be overheard saying that they're pretty fed up with David and his shit. But they still say they're gonna have a town meeting, to put his leadership to a vote. For all its faults, this community does keep its head, even during an impending mutiny.

It's a shame we don't get to see that election. David doesn't have a great platform to run on. "Yes, some of our men were killed, and the entire town was threatened with infection. But what we're failing to recognize is the inalienable fact that I very much want to fuck girls! Young ones! Does a man's thirst slacken whilst traveling through a desert? Nay, it grows! So I ask you, fellow survivors: Is it too much to ask that a man be supplied with young women at the expense of literally all else? I say not! Who's with me!"

Snow Dash

I really like how this section is laid out. The heavy snow and ringing bell give a sense of the size of the community, without actually showing very much of it. The path is ultimately linear, but there are a surprising number of small options within that path. The storm lends additional authenticity to the stealth, and makes the enemies limited field of vision seem much more natural. It's just good all around.

Maybe this is how a truly convincing stealth game could be made -- Have the whole thing take place in a heavy snowstorm. Failing that, perhaps a dense fog, of the *Turok 64* variety. Or possibly establish that all the enemies have cataracts. It could take place in a retirement home. Or, the player could have some manner of cataract inducing gun. Keep in mind that I didn't say this game would be cool.

I back-stab a guy (who I like to imagine is named "Pierre LaGuerre"), and his blood splatters all over a snowy car. I don't know how I never noticed those blood splatters before. They are really gross and cool.

Snow flakes melt on the screen, as though I'm an apocalypse reporter crawling behind Ellie, with snow hitting my camera lens. The *Mario 64* team were pretty forward thinking when they showed Lakitu following Mario as a cameraman, as a way to explain the 3D viewpoint -- It was probably more explaining than was necessary, but it's a metaphor that has really stuck around.

One guy's last words before I stab him are, "It's so damn cold..." Not a good way to go, buddy. Take a rest. You're sleeping with Pierre, now.

Battle At The Ol' Stabby Chalet

Ellie keeps runnin' and stabbin', being funneled through town until she arrives at the boss-fight-chalet. There are two windows you can jump through to enter, and a third you can try to climb back out of. But the pane of that window isn't fully open, and Ellie will suddenly die if you push against the geometry too much. So, don't do that. I sure am learning a lot by deliberately playing this game like an asshole.

There's a health pack laying on a counter, which I do not pick up. David bursts through the door and says, "You're easy to track." Yeah? Tell that to all the guys I just stabbed and left in the snow! Maybe you shoulda given them a few pointers, because those fools went DOWN. Those fools DIED. DIED IN THE FREEZING SNOW, BECAUSE I KILLED THEM. I'M SO EASY TO TRACK THAT ALL OF YOUR FRIENDS ARE DEAD. DAVID. SO GO AHEAD AND ACT TOUGH! YOU CLEARLY KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING! I don't fancy David's chances, is what I'm saying.

A lot of people complained about the rigidity of this boss fight, and I can understand why. It may be the narrowest point in the game. If you don't do just what the game wants, you're in for such a stabbing. I managed to puzzle it together pretty quickly, so I don't have any real problem with it.

That kinda shit can be annoying, though. When Shadow Of The Colossus was re-released for PS3, I wanted to show my friend the fifth colossus, the giant bird one. But to get there, I needed the fourth colossus to stare into a tunnel, so I could run behind him and stab him in the butt. I don't know what was going on that day, but I just could not do it. Maybe I was being too impatient, but no matter what I tried, that stupid fuck would not look in that goddamn hole.

So, yeah. If the David boss fight gets you heated, I feel ya, Ophelia. That's a saying I'm trying to get going.

The mechanic of needing to avoid stepping on broken plates is particularly gamey. Their crunch will alert David, and there are an awful lot of plates on the ground. The ovens in the kitchen are turned on and cooking, showing that this building is in current use. So who left all these plates everywhere? Was there an earthquake? Was someone playing plate-frisbee?

"I'm sorry about your horse," David says. "I truly am. I hope you take comfort in

knowing we won't waste any part of him." Haha! What a dick. As far as boss banter goes, that's pretty good.

We stab each other for a bit, and next thing I know, the whole stupid place is on fire! How did that happen? Wikipedia says that a lantern fell over. I didn't see it, but I guess they would know. I trust 'em.

I get my final stab on David while in the kitchen, which is a first. I usually take him out by the front door, near all the fire. I actually thought that might be required, since the Winter-Finale cutscene definitely doesn't take place in the kitchen. I wonder how the game is going to finesse that? I feel a little more teleportation coming on.

Joel Comes To Town

Joel staggers through the snow, arriving at the ragged outskirts of David's settlement. Vengeance pumps hotly through his veins, and his fists clench in anticipation of all the faces he's about to punch. He's still at 3/5 health.

I sneak past the first batch of guys, then get grabbed from behind. As I'm struggling to break free, another dude just shoots me! With a shotgun! Is that really a safe thing to do, when your friend is holding on to me?

Regardless of its tactical wisdom, that death really did shock me. The brutality of this game can still amaze me, even after all these playthroughs.

I make my way inside a building, and I have no notes about how I got there. So I, uh... I guess it went pretty well?

When you go from the coldness of the outside to the relative warmth of inside, there's a momentary border of ice around the edge of the screen. Huh.

I find Ellie's backpack, as well as a corpse manifest. Creepy. Then I find a buncha corpses! CREEPY! Then I step outside to see the Ol' Stabby Chalet ON FIRE! OH, FUCK!!

Ellie Revives

Ellie wakes up, and starts slowly climbing toward a stray machete, which I guess must be David's. Ellie's not in the kitchen anymore; she has in fact teleported to the corner of the chalet. But if I wasn't paying such close attention during this playthrough, I'm sure I

wouldn't have noticed.

It woulda been cool if there was a slightly different cutscene, depending on where the boss fight ended. And an unlockable unicorn steed wouldn't have killed anybody. Come on, Naughty Dog. Try to give a shit.

I'm crawling, crawling, crawling, and David kicks me! What a dick! Fine, then. I just won't crawl. So then David boots me in the head, so hard that I die. Christ. Crawling, it is.

David climbs on top of Ellie, and says, "You think you know me? Huh? Well, let me tell you somethin'. You have no idea what I'm capable of." Then Ellie grabs the machete and hacks him the fuck up.

As last words go, those are kinda pathetic. I'm sure David was a bad dude, who did a lotta bad things. But his last moments on Earth were spent insisting to a teenager that he's a real mean fella. He's not very secure about his evil, needing it validated like that. As president of the Villainy Club, I'm insisting that he turn in his jean jacket and cigarettes.

David's little yelp before he takes a machete to the face is perfect. A fitting end for a gross, soft-talkin' weirdo.

David The Gross Weirdo

David is a real shitbag. I think we can all agree on that. It's easy to draw some pretty damning conclusions about him, and his plans for Ellie are clearly exploitative. David sucks, and I'm glad that he's dead. Fuck that dude.

But seeing as how this whole book is about splitting hairs, let's split some hairs. Between David saying "You have no idea what I'm capable of," and Ellie telling Joel, "He was gonna...", the prevailing opinion seems to be that David was planning to sexually assault Ellie. Not at some later date, and not as part of the institutional fabric of his society, but then and there, in the burning chalet.

I think this may be a case of the Internet jumping to conclusions. Internet discourse has a tendency to take a reductive view of virtually all situations, and this seems no different. David's original plans obviously involved exploiting Ellie. But in that moment, I think his only intention is murder. During the battle, he doesn't hesitate to shoot, stab or kick Ellie to death. He's not trying to keep her alive.

Ellie saying, "He was gonna..." could be referring to a lot of things, and during this play-through, my instinct is that she's referring to being held down on a butcher's table, and almost killed. In an action story, it's easy to take violent scenes for granted; they become the expected method through which the story unfolds. Whereas the notion of David being a sexual predator is more of a hot-button issue, and is much more compelling to debate.

But if you look at Ellie's time in David's town, I think the direct threat of violence is by far the larger issue. Being held down and almost chopped up would be a terrifying and traumatic event. Ellie's a tough person, but in being held on that chopping block, we have never seen her so helpless, or so alone, against such a drastic situation. It's a quick scene, but is more than enough to justify her sobbing relief when she sees Joel. It's far less abstract than her fear of David's future intentions.

As for the theory that David intends to sexually assault Ellie in the chalet, it's worth noting that the whole place is burning down. I once escaped from a huge apartment fire, and the smoke inside made it impossible to breathe, long before flames were even visible. That means that this chalet, with fire visibly overtaking it, is a seriously hostile environment. Staying inside long enough to kill someone is already cutting things close. Realistically, everyone inside should be struggling to breathe at all.

As I said, this is splitting hairs. I definitely agree that David seems capable of, and willing to sexually assault someone. It's just a bit of a pet peeve of mine when debates focus on more surface-level storytelling beats, rather than the actual reality of a character's situation. It removes a lot of nuance from a story, and is something which happens often within *The Last Of Us* fandom.

Marlene was like a second mother to Ellie; the Fireflies had a sure-fire cure for the apocalypse; the worst thing Joel ever did was tell a lie to somebody. These are all common talking points about *The Last Of Us*, none of which are particularly well-founded by the surrounding fiction. These ideas are given weight by way of being spotlit within the story itself. But that doesn't mean they actually carry such weight within the larger narrative, or that they should be accepted at face value. The notion of David carrying out a direct sexual assault on Ellie is one of those ideas. It's too superficial an interpretation of events, and ultimately does not ring true to me.

Burning Buildings

To play devil's advocate, as we learned in *Uncharted 3*, Naughty Dog has some unique ideas about what people are capable of doing during an enormous blaze. They might get involved in a lengthy fist-fight, or take some time out for a spirited game of checkers.

I'm almost surprised Drake didn't have to spin some statues around during his escape -- It's only a crazy inferno! Don't worry about it! As long as you don't somehow put the fire into a cup and literally *drink* it, you'll be fine!

So, who knows. I could always be wrong.

Surrogate

At the end of the Winter chapter, I remember thinking, "Man, this game is the best." The way the dialogue between Ellie and Joel fades away, the clear connection between the two, the implications for Joel, now that he's so deeply invested in this relationship... it's fantastic.

Initially, Joel was worried about escorting Ellie because he was scared of the effect her death might have on him. That risk eventually became too much for him to bear, so he tried to pass that responsibility on to Tommy. But he found that he was already too connected; he couldn't leave Ellie's fate up to someone else.

After this Winter chapter, Ellie has more than shown herself capable of survival. She not only managed to save herself, she saved Joel as well. It's possible that Joel now sees her as more than a daughter; he sees her as a partner in survival. Not only would losing her devastate him, but he may recognize that having her with him is directly responsible for his physical well-being. He's being pincered from both sides. At this point, Joel is fully invested. There's definitely no going back.

If I were a doctor, planning to do some fatal brain-surgery without the patient's consent, I would start watching my back.

Spring

Our next jump forward in the timeline brings us to springtime. That's not a great sentence. We open on a shot of Ellie, in a new outfit, looking at an engraving of a deer. If this were a more literary dissertation, I'd come up with some fancy ideas about what the deer might symbolize. Fuck it, let me give it a try.

In the Winter chapter, right before meeting David, Ellie was hunting a deer. And now, she's looking at a deer. So, there are definitely a couple of deer related things going on in this story. And that clearly means that, uh... please study quietly until class is over.

We're back to playing as Joel, so let's take stock of his springtime arsenal.

- 5/5 health
- 12 revolver bullets
- 6 shotgun shells
- 1 health pack
- 1 nail bomb

Where did that health pack come from? I don't remember having that. Well, I shan't use it! Don't try to tempt me, video game!

We've jumped far enough forward that all snow has melted. But Ellie is still wicked addled; winter wasn't easy for her, and now she's coming up to the Firefly camp. I don't think she knows that the Fireflies intend to kill her, but I'm sure she has some creeping dread about the operation. And there's still the possibility that the Fireflies won't be here at all. She's feeling pressure from a lot of different directions.

Joel finds a dead family in a camper, with a photograph that says "Forgive us". I assumed it was a father who killed his own family, which makes it a little odd that it says "Forgive us" rather than "Forgive me". Someone online theorized that maybe an outsider killed the family, and it was they who wrote "Forgive us". I can't tell if that makes more sense, or less. Luckily, this isn't CSI, so no one cares.

Ellie tells Joel about a dream she had, about flying in a plane, though she's never actually been in one. I didn't draw the connection initially, but she's looking right at a big ad for an airline as she says it. I'm not sure how I missed that. I guess I was too busy scavenging to pay full attention to what Ellie was up to, which is probably pretty symbolic of how Joel would actually be.

Clouds

On a bus stop, we walk past an ad for the giraffes at the zoo. That's called foreshadowing, bra.

Incidentally, there's a giraffe toy in Sarah's room, way back at the start of the game. I don't know what the direct significance of that is. I just know that it's a thing which is a thing. Feel free to cite me.

Joel's in no great hurry to meet the Fireflies, so let's take a moment to gaze at the clouds. The clouds look real nice in this section. They look more like a painting than they do like real clouds. A bit like the art style of Dishonored. You ever play Dishonored, Ellie? It wasn't perfect, but the things it did well, it did so well.

The clouds will always be free, Ellie. Ain't no cordyceps gonna get them. Unless the spores made their way up into the clouds, and the clouds rained sporey infection on everyone. Like in Return Of The Living Dead. You ever see that movie, Ellie? What's that? Fireflies? Yeah... I guess we could go look for them, if we have to. Them clouds sure is pretty, though... Okay, okay, I'm coming. Don't get your laces in a tangle. I just like clouds, and hate humans. You must know that about me by now.

Downtime

Games really are amazing pieces of art, blending together an enormous number of disciplines. Environmental storytelling in particular has always fascinated me, and is on my mind a lot here; this is one of our last opportunities to really examine our surroundings. Things are about to get crazy, so this is the last chance to just stare at the clouds.

The importance of traversing terrain is also present in the Uncharted games: Nathan Drake spends about as much time traveling as he does fighting. But in The Last Of Us, traversal takes on a more languid, contemplatory feel. There are no cliffsides to scale, or rope bridges to cross -- It's mainly just a big, flat, crumbling world, and Joel and Ellie have to keep walking through it.

Even after multiple playthroughs, I love finding new details, or re-appreciating old ones. I wonder if this is how shitty douchebags feel when they go to art galleries? Art galleries always leave me feeling bored; I'm not sure what appreciation I'm supposed to be gleaning from the stuff that I'm looking at. But I can examine the world of The Last Of Us all day. Absorbing the history of this world, and thinking about how it fell apart, is one of my favorite things.

Video games, man. Are they cool, or what?

Yes. Yes, they are. I should have stated that at the outset, to make sure we were all on the same page. If you've been reading this whole book, thinking that "video games suck" is the thesis we're all hurtling toward, I apologize for wasting your time. But hey; these things happen. Sometimes you just gotta hike up your pants, spit out your troubles, and dance your way into the next day.

Incidentally: No editors! Haha! Isn't the future great? I can fill a book with as much stupid shit as I want, and nobody can stop me! I've never been so happy with the state of literature. Fuck you, Shakespeare. You can suck my dad's choad*.

(*copyright Arin Hanson.)

Alright. Back to the track!

The Zoo

Joel heads into the huge entryway of the zoo, light shining in from one of the broken windows above. It looks wicked. This game always looks stupid-beautiful. The PS4 remaster, the PS3 version, it doesn't matter. Both versions look about as good as an early 21st century video game can look.

We find a letter from a guy named Graham, written to his wife. It mentions how during their evacuation, their daughter had remained level headed, while he'd been the emotional one. That's a bit on the nose. JOEL.

Joel has to boost Ellie up to the second floor, and he gets into the usual boost position. But Ellie's not paying attention, sitting on a nearby bench. This moment gets referenced a lot, and it is a great scene. It uses a familiar gameplay mechanic to illustrate Ellie's troubled state of mind, which is exactly the sort of storytelling that only a video game can provide.

I would like to point out, though, that Joel was also not paying attention. So let's not put all the weight of absent-mindedness on Ellie. Everyone's brains are pretty scattered by this point.

Once Ellie climbs to the second floor, she sees something through the window. She takes off running, and if you run after her fast enough, you can catch small glimpses of the giraffes through the windows. Or their shadows, at least.

The giraffes, right? Holy shit.

I saw a giraffe up close once. It was huge. It's such a crazy creature; it's amazing to think that animals like that are just walking around the Earth. And here, they really are just walking around. I think part of the power of this scene is that, on some subconscious level, we see those giraffes and think: Look at how *well* things are going. Human beings are gone, and everything seems to be fine.

Good Morning, Captain

Sometimes, it can be weird to read through your own book. I got to this section, about the giraffes, and what did I find? Three pretentious mini-essays about video games, which had little or no connection to The Last Of Us. I don't know who the fuck wrote those. The past version of myself, presumably.

So I asked the present version of myself: Captain, how are we gonna fix these goddamn things? And after a brief perusal, my Captain self replied: We are going to delete them.

There was one neat idea in one of the essays -- I wrote about how re-playing Bionic Commando on the NES made me feel like Japanese programmers from the Eighties were sending me a message, which could only be understood through the medium of playing that video game. Video games, being a new form of art, are allowing for a new form of communication. It's almost kinetic; no other medium can decode or replicate the message. It's just something that you *feel*, and understand through playing.

That's a neat idea. But it's one that, unsurprisingly, words were not able to adequately describe. So there you go. You're all caught up. I've got plenty of other pretentious hogwash lined up before the end of this book, so we're not missing out on anything by passing over this batch.

Giraffes

These fucking giraffes, though. Man, they look cool. This moment is so goddamn rad.

In a way, it'd be nice if the game could end right here. Looking out at this calm moment, when everything seems alright... It's pretty perfect.

But we're not done yet. There's still a little ways to go.

Exiting The Zoo

Joel and Ellie head down some stairs, and back into cruel, cold reality. Joel says, "We don't have to do this." Joel must have some sense of dread about meeting with the Fireflies. He's familiar with their brand of zealotry; I think he knows that whatever their plan, it's unlikely that Ellie's well-being will be a priority.

Ellie says, "After this, we'll go wherever you want." There's a theory that Ellie is fully aware of what she's getting herself into, and that she's prepared to give her life in exchange for a cure. While I do think she could be talked into martyrdom, I don't think she goes in expecting to die. When she tells Joel "We'll go wherever you want," I don't think she's lying to him. I think she believes that she'll leave the Firefly compound safe and sound.

Joel says, "I ain't leaving without you." You sure ain't, Joel. You sure ain't.

There's a poster on the wall for something called "The Man I Killed." That must sound like a pretty amateur production to Joel. How about "The Town I Killed"? Check back in a few hours for "The Species I Killed". The man I killed -- pfft.

We make our way outside, and Ellie stops Joel, so she can give him the picture of Sarah. The picture she *stole* from Tommy. Gay pornography, pictures of deceased relatives -- Is there no limit to what this girl will steal?

This time, Joel gives in. He accepts the picture, and says a person can't escape their past. And right in the middle of this tender moment, Ellie starts cleaning her knife. This klepto is cold-blooded.

We pass by an abandoned tank. Imagine if there was some kinda cheat code you could use to ride that bad boy? That'd seriously change the tone of this game's ending. Although, now that I think about it, I guess it'd end up kinda the same.

As they continue walking toward the Fireflies, Ellie says, "This time it's gonna be different." There's no way she expects to die. She's way too upbeat to think that she's marching toward her death.

The Underpass

Joel and Ellie are still really bad at maneuvering across debris. So, going through the scary underpass is our only option. I sure hope it isn't completely filled with Infect- aw, fuck boners.

I know that one of the most exasperating things someone can tell you is that you're "playing a video game wrong". But if you had so many weapons and so much ammunition at your disposal that you cleared out all the Infected in this underpass, then god dammit: You played this game in a real weird way.

I know I've been singing this chorus throughout the book, but for real: Massive stores of mega-weapons is not how an apocalypse game is meant to be experienced. When you're faced with a giant mass of blind killers, *you sneak past them*. You don't pull out a flamethrower and mow everyone down. Even John McClane piggybacking on John Rambo wouldn't do that.

Harder Is Easier

I have a few more thoughts about difficulty in video games. I bet you're not tired of hearing about that yet, huh?

I wanna talk about some of the weird contradictions inherent in playing games on Hard. I've come to find that playing on higher difficulties can actually feel easier, because the rules of the game seem more clear.

On Easy, an experience is porous -- Failure can still result in success. The walls of the simulation seem wobbly, and my engagement with a game inevitably ebbs away. My mind isn't fully attuned to the experience; I find myself leaning back, rather than leaning forward. Afterward, I probably won't have a clear mental picture of the areas I've progressed through; games seem forgettable, like an experience that I saw from a distance, rather than something I actually took part in.

On Hard, those wobbly walls become stable. Failure leads to death; the rules are well-defined, and my mind needs to be engaged in order to understand those rules. I'm paying attention -- I'm leaning forward. It's like Hard mode is a jock strap, which keeps everything securely in place.

I'm trying to think of a better description than "Hard mode is a jock strap", but that's what I got.

Playing games on Hard reminds me of how it felt to play 8-bit games as a kid. Those games were hard as fuck, because there was no real expectation that a player would complete them. Games weren't about winning -- They were about existing within whatever system the designers had created, and trying to survive within that environment for as long as possible.

The increased prominence of storytelling in video games is what has led to a different set of expectations from players. Now, it's considered unacceptable if a dedicated player is unable to see a game's ending. The feeling and purpose of video games has changed, at the service of storytelling which is, generally, not very good.

I feel a bit evangelical about this topic. I think it's important. For years, I played games on Normal. I never dreamed of bumping the setting up to Hard. I slipped into the modern form of gaming, and had no conception as to how this indistinct style of gaming was contributing to my lessening interest in the medium. I assumed that I was just growing up, and aging out of the hobby. When I started playing games on Hard, I only expected to find a harder video game. I didn't expect to discover so much richness in the experience, or to find such a strong connection to gaming's past.

Now, as my interest in video game storylines continues to wane, my interest in video game mechanics is growing. This is what video games are: They're a mechanical challenge, a puzzle to be understood and solved. The point is not to get to the next cutscene. Playing an easy game just to see the next story beat is basically akin to watching a movie, with some light roadblocks added in. It's not the best that either medium has to offer.

The storytelling in *The Last Of Us* is much better than in most games, but its cutscenes and dialogue alone would not have inspired me to write this book. The integration of gameplay and storytelling is the secret ingredient, and even that only functions at the higher difficulties. If *The Last Of Us* were only balanced at Normal difficulty, I don't think I would have written this book. *The Last Of Us* on Normal is not the same game. Having Joel loaded up with items and weapons is not the same story. Mechanically and narratively, a dominant Joel is not interesting. To me, the distinction is very important.

Far Cry 4

A common misconception about playing games on Hard is that it's only for high-level players, the super-virtuosos who can dance easily through any bombed-out battlefield. But that really ain't the case.

I'm okay at video games, but I'm not great. I die a lot. Aiming a gun with an analogue stick is a particular problem for me. I was a keyboard-and-mouse kid, so firing guns with a controller has never been my strong suit. I can carefully snipe someone, or I can spray and pray. But precise shooting in a high stress situation is rarely gonna go my way. When it's time to upgrade weapons, my shotguns always get a lot of attention.

So I don't play on Hard difficulty to offset some massive inborn talent. If I'm any better

than an average player, it's only by a bit, and that advantage isn't reflex-based. Any advantage comes from situational awareness and fluid problem-solving, which are skills that playing at higher difficulties engenders.

Progress in a video game shouldn't be measured by the literal progress one makes through a game's storyline. A good example is when I played Far Cry 4 at my friend Mike's house. I set the difficulty to Hard, and I died. Then I died, and I died. And I died again. I played all day, but made very little tangible progress.

Then I moved away for awhile. A year later, I was back at Mike's house, so I fired up Far Cry 4 again. And I died. And I died. And I died. It was getting a bit pathetic. I felt like I was a mentally ill old man, who kept wandering into the woods and expiring. Mike's a very polite fellow, but it must have crossed his mind that I seemed to suck pretty hard at that game.

This is where the contradiction of playing on Hard comes in. During all those deaths, I appeared to be failing haplessly, and I was. It seemed like Hard mode was not for me. But under the hood, I was making progress. Slowly, I was getting my Far Cry legs back. On a lower difficulty, I would have stumbled my way through many more story missions. My apparent progress would have seemed much greater. But my fundamental Far Cry abilities would not have been being trained and tested.

Playing on Hard, I gradually found the edges of the simulation. It slowly became apparent what I could and could not do. Plans were wiring up in my brain as to how I should use my particular skills and playstyle to approach the situation put in front of me. I was gathering information and skills, and once I finally got over that initial hump, I was on fire. I started kicking the crap out of everybody's butt.

After I got home, my brain was still lit up. I wanted to play more Far Cry. My laptop was too old to play Far Cry 4, so I loaded up Far Cry 3, and installed a hardcore mod. I cleared out every outpost, then installed a different, even harder mod, and cleared all the outposts again. I went on a two-week tear of Far Cry mania, and it was awesome.

Without that initial Hard-mode failure-a-thon, those skills would not have developed. Instead of earning my run as a Far Cry mega-mercenary, I would have had a blander and much more forgettable experience. I would have seen more of the story, and in a much more timely fashion. But without an appropriate level of friction, I would have struggled to even remember that experience.

Instead, I have a very clear memory of my time in the underbrush, studying enemy camps and planning my assaults. A little corner of my mind lights up even now, as I remember how hard-won those experiences were, and how satisfying it was when I

finally accomplished them.

That's the catch-22 -- Those early deaths were clearly failures, but at the same time, were not failures. They were a process of me learning the game, and of *playing* the game. That's what playing a game is; playing shouldn't be thought of as "winning". For games to jettison such a fundamental aspect, to disregard challenge in service to cutscenes that nobody actually likes, seems very wrong to me. It's not the direction that gaming should be moving toward.

Fully story-based games are obviously a different discussion. I still like those games, and if telling a story is all that a game is trying to accomplish, then that becomes the meaning of its gameplay. But if you're playing a game where you can die, then god dammit, you better die. You better die a lot. If you don't die, then what are you doing? What are you playing? What is the experience actually about?

Don't be afraid to go into that options menu, and to explore the upper reaches of the difficulty setting. Add those colors to your palette. There's a lot of value to be found in video games, and a lot of non-literal ways in which a game can communicate with you. You just need to open yourself up to that experience.

I can try to explain this idea all day, but it's something you can only understand by experiencing it. Instead of asking video games to lay down for you, and to allow you to pass unfettered, you should be asking your games to fight back. You should feel the cold shock of failure, and you should feel it often. You should feel it to enough of a degree that you're forced to use your ingenuity to overcome that obstacle. Those are the kinds of experiences that you'll remember.

Seeing the next cutscene is not the primary benefit of playing a video game, and having it handed to you is of less value still. The story is just another story, like the million that came before it. It's not the ending of a game that's important; what's important is the way in which we get to that ending.

Sneaky-Sneaky

Ellie and Joel sneak past the first batch of Infected, then move into the side hallway, where Joel chokes out three zombos who are standing inert. Ellie calls the first one an asshole. I agree that he's an asshole, but dude; he was just standing there. Thank you for being on my side, though.

This sure does seem like a shitload of Infected to be this near the Firefly base. I guess, like with Bill, they could be using Infected as a type of protection. I'm not sure if that's

feisty, or crazy. Maybe the pair of Bloaters made it too risky to clear the area out.

The last stretch is fucking scary. As I use my most dainty crawl, I start questioning whether Bloaters are actually blind. They must be, since they evolve from Clickers. But there hasn't been much opportunity to test their sight. Creeping past them feels pretty intense.

The Disappearing Horde

There are a few points where a new area loads, and the Infected behind you suddenly stop making noise, as they're removed from memory. It's never more apparent than it is here. There are so many supremely creepy Infected sounds, and all of a sudden, they're gone. It's a shame they couldn't have gradually faded away instead.

Ellie is also very loud during our escape, saying, "Look out below!" as she roughly pushes a box down for Joel to climb. Maybe Naughty Dog really didn't intend for many people to stealth through this section, because Ellie's behavior is very incongruously noisy. But I still maintain that killing them all is ridiculous.

The Subway Tunnel

Making our way through this semi-collapsed tunnel, I find a comic hidden up on an air vent, in fully readable condition. Who the hell left that there? Maybe one of the Infected is a Day Of The Dead style zombie -- He was going through the motions of reading, even though he didn't know why he was doing it. Or maybe it's just a dumb collectible strewn about the game for no reason.

Collectibles

Man, collectibles... Where did that start? I seem to remember picking up a lotta dumb shit in Commander Keen, but I mainly associate collectibles with Grand Theft Auto. I collected everything in GTA III, as I did in Vice City. But by San Andreas, the concept had proven itself untenable. I feel like Rockstar knew that, as they had you diving to find one hundred scattered pearls. Anyone who completed that, I feel like the joke was on you.

From San Andreas onward, I never finished collecting the pointless shit in any game. In The Last Of Us, I've never found all the Firefly dog tags. Because, why would I? Who gives a shit?

That being said, isn't it weird when you find a clever little corner of a game map, perfect for the placement of a hidden collectible, and there's nothing there? I found the weird corner -- Now give me a trinket! I want a trinket!

Basically, human brains are dumb. So, fuck us all.

The Tricky Clicker

We continue traveling, and Ellie says that once things are done with The Fireflies, Joel can teach her how to swim. She's plenty upbeat about it -- She definitely doesn't expect to die. I'd put all my Okada bucks on it. I really don't know how that theory even started.

The Last Of Us doesn't have many jump-scares, but this is a good one. Joel sends Ellie behind a fence to check for loot, and a Clicker suddenly grabs her. It's a great surprise moment, but even greater because you can circumvent it. The Clicker is just sitting there, hanging out. My friend Matt spotted it right away, but my first time, I didn't see shit. It's the world's first fair jump scare!

Well, semi-fair -- By staying completely immobile, that Clicker is behaving pretty oddly. Maybe it's hungry and worn out. Or maybe it's just depressed. It lost its comic book, on top of an air vent. He couldn't read it, but the thin pages gave him a sense of comfort. Endure and survive, noble Clicker. Endure and survive. But not during this playthrough, because I'm gonna kill you.

There's a box of bullets sitting outside this ambush. That can't be a coincidence; maybe if I arrive with no ammo, there would be no way to stop the Clicker from killing Ellie. But I don't wanna pick up those bullets, nor use the few that I have. I do, however, still have a nailbomb.

Whoops -- I'm not able to angle the nailbomb correctly the first time, and the Clicker kills Ellie. But the second time I toss it right on the dick's head! Nice! He doesn't even move after the explosion; when Ellie comes close, he just stays sitting. Noble in death, the way he could never be in life. Gallant in his sitting.

The Only Puzzle

It seems like, over the course of our adventure, we've spent a fair amount of time moving planks and finding pallets. Those sections never bothered me, but there's a segment of bellyachers who act like The Last Of Us should have been titled "Pallet Man & Drown Girl". What's the big hurry, dudes? Soak in the scenery. Smell the pine-

scented goodness of an old-world pallet. Place a ladder on the ground, when you meant to set it against a wall.

I don't mind the pallet puzzles, because they're super easy. The Last Of Us keeps the puzzling light, and this underground ladder section is really the only proper puzzle in the game. Figuring it out feels kinda neat; it seems like a practical solution to a fairly reasonable obstacle.

One of the first pet peeves I ever developed about video games was the concept of the locked door -- If you absolutely, positively need to get through a door, there are a ton of options. In some games, you're carrying a literal axe in your hand. But Mr. Dainty needs the proper key. He doesn't wanna lose his damage deposit.

That sort of thing seemed fine back in 8-bit games. But nowadays, a barrier should be a tad more creative. Here, we do some mildly engaging ladder-moving, and we move on. I don't hate it, and that's really all I can ask.

Hey, the water here has fish in it. Cool.

The Rapids

Our next obstacle involves navigating some rushing rapids, by leaping across a series of overturned buses. Joel has recently made a number of suspect choices: Heading into a dark underpass, sneaking through a concentration of Infected larger than any we've seen, struggling through a relatively elaborate ladder-placement puzzle -- It's fair to say that his current situation was at least partially avoidable.

I think most players, myself included, expected The Last Of Us to be more of a re-skinned Uncharted game. Instead, it has a much different feel; it isn't until these rapids that Uncharted's DNA becomes plainly visible. Where exactly did this set piece come from? Why are we leaping between old cars, across subterranean but mysteriously well-lit rapids?

The natural way that one environment segues into another is a testament to Naughty Dog's design acumen. You just accept that, somehow, there was no option but for us to end up in this dangerous and enormously unlikely situation.

But we're here now, so let's just do it. As we're jumping across an old bus, it collapses into the water, and Ellie drowns. Great.

Firefly Fuckfaces

Joel rescues Ellie's limp body from the water, and some soldiers show up as he's trying to resuscitate her. These soldiers are real dicks. I get that soldiers are supposed to be... soldiery... but their attitude seems a little much. Are you really gonna knock out a person who's clearly trying to help a drowning victim? Chill the fuck out, Captain Anarchy.

I'm sure the soldiers' attitude is meant to soften the fact that Joel will soon be killing them. But you can definitely feel the hand of the author. It finds it weird when a character acts like a ridiculous asshole, and the narrative expects me to be angry at that character. I only feel angry at the writer. I don't like having my tender feelings jerked around.

Remember that old man from the early chapters of The Walking Dead: Season 1? I didn't think, "Why is this old man being so mean?" Instead I thought, "Who the hell wrote this?" That kind of overblown, melodramatic writing never gets me invested in a story. It just makes me feel uncomfortable.

Marlene

Joel awakes in a Firefly hospital, with Marlene on overwatch. I like the return of Marlene, it's a nice bookend. Her re-appearance may feel a little narratively tidy, but there's nothing like some story structure to make things feel more structured. You know what I'm saying? You'd think I'd be getting better at explaining myself by now.

I like finding Marlene's journals throughout the hospital, and learning about the past year of her life. It's neat to imagine Marlene's journey, running in parallel to Joel's. She traveled across the country, hoping that when she arrived at the hospital, Ellie would be there. The despair of learning that Ellie never made it was coupled with a huge loss of respect from her people -- Morale was at an all time low.

Then, amazingly, Ellie does arrive. But Marlene has to immediately make the decision to sacrifice Ellie's life, in the name of a potential cure. Poor old Marlene has been through some shit.

There's a lot to like about Marlene. That being said, something about her character does feel a bit academic. She doesn't feel quite grounded. Maybe it's the fact that she's a head honcho of a fairy tale resistance group. Her back story of knowing Ellie's mom could also be seen as a bit of a contrivance. But sometimes, you need those kinds of storytelling cogs to make a machine work. And as far as storytelling cogs go, Marlene could be a lot worse.

Marlene Turns Heel

This game really nails facial expressions; the worry on Joel's face when he asks about Ellie is perfect. He learns that the Fireflies are sending Ellie straight into surgery, and he is none too pleased. Marlene has a soldier escort Joel from the hospital, and tells him to be thankful he's being granted that much. The soldier, of course, is a total dick.

"Get up," the dickish soldier says. Joel doesn't respond. "I said get up." Joel waits another moment, then looks up. That's probably the moment when Joel decides he's gonna kill that guy.

The soldier leads Joel down a hallway, where Joel spots his bookbag full of gear, and stops walking. I don't know shit about fighting, but I like how Joel lets the soldier's gun touch his back, so he knows exactly where he needs to elbow smack it.

Joel overpowers and shoots this motherfucker, asking where the operating room is. Then Joel shoots him again, and learns that the operating room is upstairs. Finally, Joel finishes the guy off. So long, dickish soldier. You shoulda listened when your mother counseled you about being less dickish.

Joel then grabs his knapsack, and steels himself for an end-of-game-M16-kill-a-thon.

The End-Of-Game-M16-Kill-A-Thon

A lot of people are critical of the late-era-Rambo-ness of this hospital sequence. An automatic weapon death-fest does seem a bit like escalation for escalation's sake. But I would like to make a case that some of that blame can be placed squarely on you, the reader!

To jump ahead briefly: I manage to navigate this whole section without picking up any of the soldier's weapons. Ending the game in an explosion of mega-murder is not actually required. Granted, that kind of restraint would be bizarre: The game is pitting the player against extreme odds, and has just handed them an assault rifle. But, restraint is possible.

On my first playthrough, I hid around a corner, shooting each soldier as they arrived. I left them in a literal corpse pile, and I ain't proud of it. I was feeling overwhelmed by all the automatic weapons, and decided to fudge the system. It definitely felt like I was taking advantage of a weakness in the AI, and as my pastor told me: When you exploit AI, you're really only robbing yourself. As well as robbing the lives of all those brave Fireflies, who keep running around the corner like excited, shootable puppies.

But things didn't have to go down that way. I could have been more suave. I just panicked. So did you, and so did Joel. Sometimes, it's just M16 time.

Joel's Brutality

While it's possible to sneak through the hospital in a more pacifist manner, I do think the M16 route actually makes more narrative sense. Joel has learned, over the past twenty years, that if someone is gonna cause him problems down the road, he needs to remove them now. That's how he's survived this long; killing these Fireflies isn't a hugely severe day for him. It's more of a resigned reality. As with David's men, or the Hunters in Pittsburgh, or the gun-runners in Boston, and on and on... People are putting Joel in danger, so killing them is what he has to do. If he has nightmares, it's probably not gonna be about these Fireflies.

It may be unrealistic for him to be able to kill so many people at once, when they all have body armor and huge guns. But I dunno -- It is a video game. I think you can use that excuse at least once, so I'm gonna invoke it now.

Half-Measures

Not only is wanton murder one of Joel's better choices, given the circumstances, but the Fireflies could learn a thing or two from his cruelty. Joel knows the Fireflies are gonna follow him until they get Ellie back. But if he can break up this unit, there may not be enough command structure left to organize a solid hunt. If Joel had a way to blow up the whole hospital, he'd probably do it. Gotta tie up those loose ends, no matter how monstrous the means. People can't be trusted. Joel learned that lesson through Sarah's death, and Ellie's near-death just re-enforces the fact.

Marlene was nice enough to dump Joel outside, rather than do him in. But if she had ended Joel while he was knocked out, maybe with a nice lethal injection, the Fireflies woulda won out. It's monstrous, but it works.

One of Marlene's voice recorders mentions that the other Fireflies wanted to kill Joel, and she insisted he be set free. Half-measures were her undoing. When you think through her decisions, Marlene slipped on a lot of banana peels -- Every choice she made had seriously negative consequences, and none of them are mistakes Joel would have made.

"But oh, that ending sequence! The things this game had me do! That poor doctor!"

I'm not saying it's not brutal. Joel's an asshole, the Fireflies are assholes. Everyone's an asshole, and this whole situation is crazily harsh. But man... it's the fucking apocalypse. You really think an apocalypse survivor like Joel would hesitate to kill a doctor? Anything that gives these soldiers less reason to come after Ellie is something that he's gonna do.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. We'll get there. Have your soft little throat ready, doctor. Joel's a-coming.

Stockholm Syndrome

Perhaps now is a good time to talk about Stockholm Syndrome. It really is easy to justify the actions of a video game character, when you've spent so many hours playing as them. You're largely complicit in their actions, and you can start to wildly re-calibrate your standards for acceptable behavior.

For example: Say there's this doctor, who might be the last qualified brain surgeon in existence. Say he's trying to develop a vaccine that could reverse an extinction level event. But to do so, he has to kill someone, who my avatar can't survive without.

On the surface, it's not very cool to kill that surgeon. But if given enough time to marinate in the situation, I get to a point where I can't wait to kill that Ph.D mother-fucker. If I had the flame thrower, I'd use it, just to hurt him more. I'd think of Ellie, then think of Sarah, and I'd light him up.

That kind of identification is something video games are very well-suited to accomplishing. There are more noble uses for the phenomenon, such as describing the plight of someone with depression, or of a transgendered person. Here, we only get a window into the mind of a co-dependent murderer. But, that empathy still kicks in. In any other medium, I think it would be a lot harder to side with Joel and his doctor barbecue. Truly, video games are the coolest.

The Battle Zone! (aka The Hospital)

12 revolver bullets
6 shotgun shells
1 health pack

Time for the final stretch! Shit... I meant to save my nail bomb for the ambush at the end of the hallway on this floor. Cock! Those jerks always fuck me around.

As I said before, I was nervous about facing all these guns. But it only takes a few tries for me to stealth to the final hallway. I hide behind a desk while three soldiers run past. So far, the famous soldier-kill-a-thon has been utterly bloodless.

But, this hallway. This has always been one of the toughest parts of the game for me, with a set of soldiers lying in wait next to the exit. I start running, and I guess because I've gotten here so quickly, there's only one soldier coming out of the door, still setting up. I punch him a couple of times, hop through the door, and I'm safe. Nobody on the whole floor was killed, and I didn't even get a scratch. Crazy.

This is a pretty good feeling. I've got 12 bullets, 6 shotgun shells, 1 health pack, and that's only because the game forced me to take them. I made it all this way without picking things up. That's crazy.

You know, I really shoulda shot that trapped, infected guy back in Boston. I didn't need the bullets. He's probably still there now, all insane and trapped. Sorry, son. Hopefully someone else puts you out of your misery.

From The Mind Of Doctor Kidkill

On the next floor we find the head surgeon's voice recorder, which says that he wants to replicate the conditions of Ellie's infection. Ellie has the cordyceps all up in her brain, but it's inert. So this won't be a full cure per se -- Even if it works, all humans will still be living with a modified cordyceps fungus in their brains. That's pretty creepy.

To think of Joel as the destroyer of the human race, just because he stopped this experiment, seems like a little much. Humankind doesn't need this medicine to survive. What it needs is to not be a pack of insane assholes.

But that, sadly, seems to be beyond our means. So fuck humans. Ellie doesn't need to die for us. If the human race is so petty that poison mushrooms are enough to render us

extinct... then I think maybe that's what's gotta happen, babe.
"Hey Keith, what have you been up to this year?"

"Oh, I've been writing this book about a video game. In the end, I ended up arguing that I didn't really care if the human race became extinct."

"Oh- okay. About a video game? Like, uh, Pac-Man or whatever? Should I call somebody? Like, your mom or something?"

"Dude, grow up. It's the nineties. Video games are about extinction now."

I like being able to see the situation from the surgeon's point of view: He talks about the hopeless void he's been moving through all this time, and all the people who've died in the search for a cure. This game really does a good job of balancing the viewpoints of all sides. Nobody's fully wrong or fully right, which is something that normally strikes me as kind of annoying. But this particular moral vagueness is pretty well crafted.

The Final Stand

So here we are, at the last batch of enemies. They've got this hallway packed with soldiers, all to take down one man! Surely, they'll be able to drop me! Surely to fuck!

I remember watching my friend Matt play this section; his overall playtime was longer than average, because he's a really methodical player. He approaches each enemy as carefully as possible, and plants fallback-explosives, in case he needs to retreat. His strategy is pretty impressive, and he cleared these motherfuckers the fuck out.

I admire that dedication to a sense of place, and to behaving realistically. But I can't quite do it. I like realism in gaming, but I also always try to break a game's systems. I like learning the borders of a simulation, and using that info to throttle the life out of everything.

In that spirit, I duck down and try to push my way straight through these pricks. There's no need to save my items any more, but I don't want this to devolve into a firefight. I've used stealth to get this far; surely I can use it to get a little farther.

Unfortunately, I get shot in the throat and die instantly.

On my second attempt, I sneak past everybody, no problem. The very last soldier grabs me from behind, and does a little damage before I shake him off. Then I pass through the door, barricade it, and that's that.

I've kinda destroyed this game for myself, mechanically speaking. It's like the day in Tony Hawk 2 when you realize that you can skate for as long as you want, because the round won't end until you finish your combo, and your combos are siiiiick.

This whole hospital section was so damn hard the first time I played. Now, I can slip through it like I'm a magical ghost-man.

The Operating Room

Joel heads toward the operating room, and we can see the spooky shadows of the surgeons through the window. Fuck you, surgeons! Stop that surgery!

Marlene's final recorder said, "This is a chance to save us, to save all of us." But I just don't believe it. I don't believe in these Fireflies. It sounds like sad desperation, like clinging to false hope. This is exactly the kind of hope that Joel is wary of, and Marlene is willing to kill her friend's daughter in the name of it.

Judging by the surgeon's voice recorder, he seems to believe in what he's doing. And who knows, maybe he's right? Maybe this operation will lead to a vaccine? But, whoops! I stabbed him in the throat! So I guess we'll never know. Dark times.

Player Complicity

The PS3 Naughty Dog games are generally pretty straightforward, but they do a good job of not letting the guiding hand of the developer feel too obvious. However, this doctor murder definitely funnels events more narrowly than usual.

Walking up to the doctor isn't enough to trigger a stab animation. They want you to actually press the button yourself. But you can't walk around the doctor. You can't even shoot him in the foot and let him hobble away, because any wound will kill him instantly. Let's be honest; even without Joel, this doctor was not long for this world. Eventually he was gonna bump his head on something and immediately drop dead.

Maybe the scene would have worked better as a fully scripted event: The player opens the door, and Joel moves in to kill the doctor before the player can regain control. But I also like that they insist on the player being complicit in Joel's actions, even if it takes a few weird contortions to get us there. It's probably frustrating for those who want to save the doctor, but it's more compelling for those of us who don't.

Critics often complain about ludonarrative dissonance in video games -- The idea that

the narrative presentation of a character doesn't match their in-game actions. The Last Of Us took that idea right to the wall. You want the dissonance loop closed? You wanna see what a protagonist from an action game would really be like? Then we might have to fudge things a bit, in order to make this doctor die. Because that's who you're playing as: This is the story of the man who would absolutely kill that fucking doctor.

"But I wouldn't kill the doctor," says Player A. "I should have the option to leave him alive. In fact, I would have let the surgery go ahead. This is a video game, I should have these options."

There's a peculiar idea, among gamers, that multiple endings are a technology unique to video games. Additionally, players have come to believe that multiple endings are a good idea. In actuality, many mediums are capable of delivering multiple endings. But they don't, because multiple endings are total dogshit.

Multiple Endings

I'm not a fan of multiple endings in narrative-based video games. Now, allow me to talk your fucking ear off about it, won't you?

When a game like Fallout recounts your character's actions as a coda, that can be cool. When The Yawhg tells a weird, random little tale, that can be cool. But when a game tries to tell a basically linear story, and caps it off with a set of diametrically-opposed endings, that's dogshit. That's dogshit right out of a dog's butt.

As a quick exercise: Think through games that had a "good" and a "bad" ending. Now, try to think of one whose narrative was really, really good. Don't spend too long, because it's a trick question. Some of those games might be okay -- You might label them "acceptable", if you're an easy grader. But none of them are great. A story cannot be great, when its entire design is fighting against itself.

This was not necessarily an obvious realization for me. I always took it for granted that video games were the only medium suited to multiple endings. I recognized that none of these endings were very good, but video game writing *itself* wasn't very good. I figured that once video game writing got better overall, the endings would get better as well.

I eventually realized that a branching story structure is a huge reason *why* video game writing is so bad. 2013 gave us the one-two punch of The Last Of Us and Grand Theft Auto 5, which worked together to definitively illustrate this point for me.

With The Last Of Us, people would talk about how they wished for the option of a

"good" ending. I did not feel that way. I stood abashed, and felt how awful goodness is. Had there been two endings, all of the symbolism and character building The Last Of Us had spent a dozen hours setting up would have fallen apart. I felt grateful that Naughty Dog had decided on a single ending, and had stuck with it.

Grand Theft Auto 5 was the reverse situation. In GTA5, players could choose which of the two major protagonists to kill, or could choose to keep everyone alive. The latter was the logical gameplay choice, as you wanted to have all the characters available for the post-game content. Unfortunately, that was also the most anti-climactic way to end the story.

If you decided to give the other endings a whirl, you were in for some strange shit. Michael's death was so baseless and bizarre that the other characters talked about how little sense it made, even as it was happening. There was no previous groundwork laid, so some vague motivations were quickly created within the scene, and it felt real weird.

The other option was Trevor's death, and man... Trevor's death could have been some great shit. Trevor is a fascinating video game character, cut from the same cloth as Joel, in the sense that Trevor acts the way a video game character would actually act. He's fucking crazy; he's not somebody you could ever tolerate being a part of your life. Where the other Grand Theft Auto protagonists' actions can be somewhat justified, through circumstance, or through a misguided desire for power, Trevor is plain fucking loco. Everyone is nervous around him, and nobody wants him around.

Despite this, the other characters still acted initially unsure as to why Trevor had been marked for death. Even that most obvious breadcrumb trail had not been properly laid out, because the story needed to cover for the possibility that the player might not kill Trevor.

But once things got rolling, it was a really great ending: Trevor was shocked that his friends would turn on him, even managing to become somewhat sympathetic in his last moments. On the other hand, Michael was revealed to be unexpectedly sinister, confirming that he was the kind of killer his family always feared him to be. He acted downright giddy at having killed one of his oldest friends. Meanwhile, Franklin was left to watch these events unfold, feeling adrift and confused. These outcomes all fit their respective characters -- Trevor's death could have been one hell of a great ending.

But since Trevor's ending was only one of many, it wasn't given any serious examination, by the developers, or by players after the fact. It wasn't the "real" ending, because there was no real ending. Had there been a single, definitive finale, the story could have built steadily toward that climax. Instead, GTA5 had to accommodate for all possibilities, which caused none of them to ring true. Michael could decide that Trevor was too

dangerous to exist in his world, or he might decide that he and Trevor were gonna be the best of friends. The same exact course of events led to both outcomes, despite the fact that they were radically different choices.

Two drastically different outcomes, which each carry equal narrative weight, is not how storytelling works. That's not how *life* works. You can't will a human relationship into being. You can't just *decide* how things are gonna be. The world is how it is, relationships are what they are. Actions have consequences.

Trevor clearly had to fucking go. But instead of committing to that logical, and somewhat moving conclusion, GTA5 ended in a muddled, meaningless mush. I really wish Rockstar had decided on a single story, and had stayed true to that story. Even if they had decided to keep Trevor alive, the happier ending could still have been massively shored up. No matter which resolution was ultimately decided on, that one linear story would always be stronger than an offering of three interchangeable ones.

Temporary Branching

On the topic of multiple endings, I wondered idly as I gazed into the sky: Why are video games the only medium saddled with these things? Is it true that video games are uniquely suited to presenting multiple endings?

Video games can keep track of large amounts of information, which could theoretically be used to tailor a story in progress. That's an interesting idea, and maybe someday it will come to full fruition. But the current situation is less complex.

Some video game plots allow for limited player agency, but fold those branches back into a single, central thread. Season One of Telltale's The Walking Dead is a good example of this: There were no choices in that story that ultimately mattered, and that worked to the story's benefit. Walking Dead had a beautiful ending, which would have been cheapened immeasurably if it had been avoidable. Besides minor cosmetic differences, we all experienced the same ending to that story. The game was building to a clear finale; there was no question as to whether Lee was going to make it into Season Two.

The Sin Tally

As for video games that do offer distinctly different endings, my cloud-gazing came up with two commonly used methods. One is to offer an ending based on positive or negative actions a player makes throughout the game. This can severely compromise

gameplay; I've made more than a few games miserable for myself in pursuit of the "right" ending. Eventually I learned to stop participating in that particular mechanic -- It became clear that the designers did not have my best interest in mind, and it was easy enough to watch the endings on YouTube instead.

Dishonored is a clear example of this method: Dishonored was either a very fun game, or a very tiresome game, depending on how constrained the player chose to behave. But that choice was far from open; everything, from the storyline to the environment itself, was trying to guide the player toward the more constrained playstyle. The player was actually punished for using anything more than a small sliver of the game's mechanics, which was a bizarre decision, as playing Dishonored with pure stealth was not very fun. The only reward given for enduring that misery slog was a "good" ending, which was, predictably, no more satisfying than the "bad" ending.

The Binary Ending

The other common method of delivering a multiple ending is to present the player with a single decision, at the very end of a game. In those cases, we're standing fully outside the realm of something that only a video game can provide. A single binary or ternary choice at the end of a story can be achieved by many mediums. For example: Books.

There has never been anything stopping novels, during their long history, from putting a single Choose-Your-Own-Adventure-style choice at the end of a story. Books have always had that technology. But authors do not use it; the "Types of fiction with multiple endings" Wikipedia page has only a small handful of entries, spread over centuries of material.

There's a clear reason why novels do not peddle in dual endings -- Because multiple endings lay waste to all that came before them. The lack of a definitive ending causes the reader to question the point behind reading a story at all. Multiple endings render symbolism, foreshadowing, and the overall themes of a story completely null and void.

Comic books, or movies in digital formats, also have the ability to present multiple endings. I know it sounds ridiculous to suggest that any of these mediums would seriously consider offering split endings. But the point is that it's just as ridiculous in a video game. Player agency during gameplay is valuable, but player agency during storytelling gives results that are just as poor in video games as they would be in any other medium.

This topic could probably use a whole book of its own, rather than just a spate of my irate-schoolmarm lecturing. But the *facts*, Jack, are that plenty of mediums are capable of presenting multiple endings. Tellingly, they have all chosen not to, because multiple

endings waylay the very point behind telling a story in the first place.

So take a cue, video games. You're stumbling drunkenly down a dead end path. I know I'm being hard on you. But I just want you to get home safe.

A Dickish Proposal

I'm sure a lot of people will disagree with my opinions about multiple endings. There's nothing wrong with branching endings! Multiple endings are cool!

If you feel that way, I think you should put your money where your mouth is. Write me a story that has two great endings. You don't need any fancy technology: Just grab a pen and paper, and get crackin'.

Nobody in history has managed it yet -- There are no moving, resonant, classic stories that have a pair of oppositional endings. So it'll make you pretty famous when you manage to pull it off. And how hard can it be? Multiple endings are great, right? They're the future! So, don't sweat it. I'm sure you've got this.

Anxiously awaiting your reply,

A Dick

The Optional Doctors

Back to cruel reality. The main surgeon is lying in a stabby pile at Joel's feet. The question now is: What do I do with his two assistants? I really don't need these bullets any more. So, the question is answered.

I decide to be a super creepo, and empty a whole clip into the first dude. Then I imagine Joel reciting dialogue from The Shawshank Redemption as he slowly reloads.

"I submit that this was not a hot-blooded crime of passion. That, at least, could be understood, if not condoned. No, this was revenge of a much more brutal and cold blooded nature... He fired the gun empty and then stopped to reload, so that he could shoot each of them again. An extra bullet per doctor, right in the head."

But then a bunch of soldiers burst into the room and shoot me! What the fuck!? I didn't know that could happen!

When the game reloads, only the main doctor is dead. I decide that's good enough. I stare down the other two doctors, then leave them to their weeping. You got real lucky, cowering medicine folk.

Escaping The Hospital

Joel picks up Ellie's limp body, and gets runnin'. The first time I played this section, I didn't catch the parallel to Joel carrying Sarah during the opening. That had happened a long time ago, and I was distracted by the way Ellie's anesthetized limbs were dangling. I wondered: What if they'd already started the surgery? What if Ellie was already dead, and Joel was only carrying her corpse out of the hospital?

We run to an elevator, soldiers at our heels, and there's a moment between floors when Joel leans his head back, soaking in what has just happened. I've made a lot of excuses for our friend Joel, but he clearly knows that what just went down was pretty fucked up.

What if the Fireflies do find someone else like Ellie, and that doctor was the last brain surgeon left? No matter how little stock Joel puts in the Fireflies, or in humankind, or in the future in general, maybe he still had a little hope. Welp, too late for that now. No sense wallowing in the past. Just keep on movin'.

Marlene's Parking Garage Ambush

The elevator doors open onto a parking garage, and sneaky ol' Marlene is there, waiting. When shit started going down, she must have come straight here, knowing it was Joel's only likely way out. She didn't bring any backup, which is gonna be a problem. Maybe she thought she could talk Joel down. That would certainly prove that she doesn't know Joel real well.

Or maybe she was just in the parking lot getting high, and didn't expect Joel to show up at all. If that's the case -- as I have now decided it almost certainly is -- she actually handles herself pretty well. Sure, she's about to get shot and killed in cold blood. But at least she's a little toasted. It's not the worst way to go. Probably only the third worst.

Ellie's Martyrdom

A common debate when *The Last Of Us* was first released was: Did Ellie agree to sacrifice herself in the name of a cure? Was Joel going against Ellie's explicit wishes by rescuing her?

Perhaps it was implicit in Ellie's attitude that she would have been willing to do whatever it took to enable a cure, no matter the price. If Marlene had asked Ellie to agree to the surgery, maybe Ellie would have said yes. But did Marlene actually ask her? Heck no, bro.

"It's what she'd want," Marlene says. "And you know it."

Well... maybe. Maybe Ellie could have been talked into signing off on her own death. But maybe not. At this point, it's important to point out that Marlene doesn't actually know Ellie very well. In the *American Dreams* prequel comic, it's revealed that Marlene didn't meet Ellie until relatively recently. She was keeping tabs on Ellie, at the request of Ellie's mother. But Marlene has been busy with the Fireflies. After spending the past year together, Joel knows Ellie a lot better than Marlene does.

To that point: For better or worse, Joel is now essentially Ellie's guardian. It probably won't be long before she emancipates herself from him, but at this point, he's the one calling the parental shots.

Sure, a cordyceps vaccine would be nice. A noble sacrifice for all of humankind! Wow! Pretty grand! But to put a kid under the knife, without involving either the kid herself, or the grizzled veteran of the psychic wars who looks after her -- What the hell did they think was gonna happen? Marlene, and by extension the Fireflies, feel that they have authority over Ellie. But they're fixin' to learn that said authority has shifted shoulders.

Opinions about the ending run the gamut, but people with children definitely seem to side more easily with Joel than they do with the Fireflies. When someone threatens a child, there aren't many limits to what a parent will do to protect that child.

Thinking of Ellie as his pseudo-daughter, Joel's actions might be hard to accept. That bond may not feel strong enough. But if you imagine Sarah in place of Ellie, things suddenly come into focus. Joel would do anything to protect Sarah, and that's the mind state he's in. There isn't really a choice, for him. There's a kid who needs protecting, and that's it.

Mondo Chaos

I think I understand where Joel's coming from, but the fact is that I don't have any kids. So more likely, I represent the players who have a pathological aversion to authority. I've hated having people tell me what to do, ever since I was a kid. If I had to kowtow to some half-baked militia, under the threat that the entire human race would die if I didn't; well, then I guess we'd better kiss our asses goodbye. The Fireflies think they can push

people around, under their self-professed authority? Well, okay. Do your worst, Fireflies. See what happens. See how far your authority really goes.

So, be it for mature reasons, or for immature ones, I'm on Team Joel all the way. Fuck all y'all Fireflies.

Marlene's Tongue vs Joel's Gun

Marlene has a gun trained on Joel, but moves her hands slowly to the sides, pointing the gun away from him. "You can still do the right thing here," she says. Man, she's definitely high. She coulda put a bullet right in Joel's noggin, then taken Ellie back upstairs, no harm, no foul.

Though with the doctor dead, it would have turned into a hilarious game of Surgeon Simulator, as Marlene tried to get Ellie's brain tissue out by herself. Only after coming down would she realize that she didn't have to personally initiate the surgery. By then it'd be too late, and she'd be sitting there sadly, covered in brains.

As it stands, the only brains she'll be covered in are *her own!!* Spoiler! You did play The Last Of Us, right? Or at least watched a playthrough? If this book is your only exposure to this product, you must have a pretty bizarre notion as to what this game is about. Maybe you're in prison, and a Kindle loaded with this book is all you've got. I, for one, envy you. Everything about that scenario sounds pretty rad. You're a man's man.

Driving Out Of Utah

So Marlene pleads her case, and we cut to Joel driving away. Ellie's in the backseat, still wearing her hospital gown. She's groggy from anesthesia, and asks Joel what happened. Joel tells her a bald-faced lie, about how there are dozens of immune people, and that the Fireflies have given up looking for a cure.

Ellie rolls over on the seat, away from Joel. That's gotta be a weird moment: Not only is she feeling wacked out from surgery-drugs, but the guy she thought was on her side is clearly telling her a giant fib. She's still in hospital clothes, for pity's sake. Instead of waking up in a hospital room, she woke up in a car, which is speeding away. They obviously did not exit the hospital under normal operating procedure.

If I'm Lying, I'm Dying

Ellie's mind is no doubt racing through the events of her recent past. Earlier, she said, "After all we've been though -- Everything that I've done -- It can't be for nothing." The first person she killed was in Pittsburgh, to save Joel. Then Joel gave her her own gun, and she didn't hesitate to shoot whoever had to be dealt with along the way. Before this journey started, she hadn't killed anybody. Traveling to the Fireflies has had a huge cost. And now, it seems that that cost, and all those lives, may have been for nothing.

In that moment, Joel must not seem like a surrogate father. Instead, he must seem like a weird stranger, who Ellie wishes had never become a part of her life.

Is Joel banking on Ellie accepting his shaky story, because she has no other choice? Or was this really the best he could come up with? I guess he was kinda pressed for time, as escape was his top priority. But the devil's in the details, and Joel's details are severely lacking.

We cut back to Marlene, and it's revealed that Joel has shot her with a hidden pistol. She begs for her life, but Joel says, "You'd just come after her," and fires again, killing her.

From a writing perspective, I like that Marlene's last words are a plea to be spared. Who wouldn't do that? If there's even a slim chance that begging might work, you're gonna give it a shot. Your last moments alive are really no time for dignity. Anybody who leaves this world in a composed, stoic manner has probably read too many stories.

Back In Jackson

Ka-boom! Last scene of the game! We made it! Party time!!!

That might be an inappropriate reaction, during this somber moment. But, fuck it! I feel like I've been writing this book for my entire life. Writing takes for fucking ever. It's one of the slowest arts, probably second only to making a video game. Cheers, lassies and laddies of Naughty Dog. You made it! Cheers, readers! You also made it! We all made it! Now everything will be great, forever!!

This last scene starts with an establishing shot of a beautiful, tree-filled vista. It also shows Ellie's full health bar, and the little knife icon, which then fade away. It probably woulda been okay to leave those out. Maybe it was some weirdness of the game engine, like how the Courier in New Vegas won't stop taking sips from the trusty Vault 13 canteen. You can be in V.A.T.S., you can be underwater -- Even during the ending, the notifications about the canteen don't stop. Motherfucker loves that canteen.

Joel says the car has broken down, and we'll have to walk for the final stretch. Ellie takes a moment to sit, touching the wound on her arm. Joel's got his watch, and Ellie's got her bite. It's like how I've got two dicks. Everybody's got their own personal symbolism, to remind them of the tough times.

We're controlling Ellie again, and I take a moment to stand at the cliff side, looking out at the scenery. It really does look beautiful.

Whoah, Nice Graphics

Certain points in video game history have seared themselves into my brain. Old Sierra games, from the AGI era, still look unreasonably beautiful to me, even though they're obviously not. When I'm lying in bed, trying to fall asleep, I sometimes think of those worlds. They left a very lasting impression.

I mentioned before how I'm fascinated by video games' ability to recreate reality. There's something, as a human, that's deeply satisfying about making an artistic representation of the world we live in. We can never understand this life, and anyone who claims they can is probably the biggest douchebag you'll ever meet. We can't comprehend this reality, or why we're here, or even where it all came from in the first place.

But by making our own approximations of this existence, we can at least demonstrate that we see it. We can show that we recognize where we are, and that we acknowledge how amazing it is. Through drawings, or paintings, or video games, we try to make little

dioramas of reality. It's a way to confirm that we're all seeing this world together; we make little dream-versions of life, as a tribute to the real thing.

The Last Of Us is a beautiful game, but strict realism isn't really the aim. As a kid, those AGI adventure games seemed real and meaningful, even though they were made of chunky blocks. Someday, when games are made of magical fairy dust, The Last Of Us will seem about as primitive as those AGI games do now. But I think I'll still look back on a vista like this, and recognize it as some beautiful shit.

There's more going on here than just Gamepro 5/5 graphics. This game is like a love letter to the planet Earth. That might be somewhat ironic, since on the surface, The Last Of Us is a game about humankind going away. But the complete package doesn't feel negative; it feels hugely positive. It feels like a game made by people who really care. Not just about video games, but about everything. Just look at those trees, dude. Look at those video game trees. They look so awesome.

What's my point? Fuck you, that's my point.

Exploring Jackson

Now that my glowy philosophizing is out of the way, let's keep kicking the tires on this bad boy. If you go in the wrong direction, you can run a pretty long way down the road before you hit a dead end. Joel must have hit a sweet jump just before that point. Maybe that's how the car broke.

I like Ellie's plaid shirt. I had a green plaid shirt in 1994 -- Those were the days, when we thought Grunge would never die. Could this whole game be a metaphor for Grunge music? Shit. Well, it's way too late to start exploring that idea now.

A street sign says "Jackson City, Next Right", and at the top someone has spray painted the Firefly symbol. Then next to that, it says, "Look for the light!" Uh oh... Who the fuck painted that? Tommy's not affiliated with the Fireflies anymore; he didn't seem to have any ex-Fireflies to consult, the last time we spoke. Maybe some Fireflies have made their way into Tommy's encampment. The Firefly influence is definitely wide, and that's bad news for Joel. His murder-spree is gonna catch up with him eventually, but it might happen a lot sooner than he expected.

Hey, there's a squirrel running up a tree. Cool.

As Joel and Ellie walk along, Joel is the most talkative he's ever been. He says he's feeling his age, which is the kind of aimless non-statement he wouldn't normally have

bothered to utter. Then he starts talking about his daughter. He's presenting it as idle chit-chat, but it's so out-of-character for him that he seems almost unhinged.

I bet Joel's got a bit of a floaty feeling in his head. He knows that he's done something crazy, but he's trying not to acknowledge it too much. He wants to pretend that he's gotten away with it, but deep down, he knows that he can't have. So he's stuck in mental limbo, and he's acting a little spaced out.

Or it could be that he stole Marlene's stash after he offed her. C'mon, Joel. That's gotta be a party foul, stealing weed from a dead person. You truly do not care for society one bit.

The Final Collectible

Normally, I would trudge dutifully through this area, stoically role-playing the situation, in order to match Ellie's troubled mood. But as I'm now trying to be extra-mindful of details, I decide to check the surrounding woods. I find one of the collectible comic books in an old car, and I gotta say, I don't love that.

Goddamn Collectibles

Generally, the collectibles in *The Last Of Us* are pretty okay. The Firefly dog tags don't mean much, and stay mostly out of the way. When I found a tag in a tree in Boston, I actually felt kind of cool. The comics themselves are neat, and their story synopsis sounds pretty bad-ass. If *Savage Starlight* were a real series, I'd give it a read.

But this final comic... dude. Bro. Dude-bro. What the hell is this doing here? It's a double mistake. Firstly, it encourages exploration during this final walk, which really breaks the cinematic flow: Joel has just done some fucked up shit, and Ellie is on some level aware of it. She knows that things have changed; the weight of the world is on her shoulders, and she's gearing up to have a really tough conversation. She should not be concerned with rifling through old cars. The only reason I found the comic during this playthrough is because I'm being a deliberately game-breaking asshole. Every other time, I walked right by, because the sanctity of the moment was more important than searching for gol-durned collectibles.

But okay: Let's say the collectible absolutely had to be there. The collectible police kicked in the door and said that every chapter needed a collectible, under threat of torture. If so, those threats must have been made right before the game was ready to ship, because this collectible has been thrown in as haphazardly as possible.

Ellie has been answering Joel very vaguely, very non-committally. She's lost deep inside her own head. This final scene is like a crystalline spiderweb of tension, its careful tone reminiscent of a delicate Faberge egg. But the moment Ellie touches the comic, she quips, "I'll read this later!" Egg, meet hammer.

Look, I know comic books are pretty cool. I worked at a comic shop, and I had a lot of good times there. But there's no way Ellie likes comics enough for Savage Starlight to pierce through the greatest existential crisis of her young life. Her dialogue is way out of line with the gravitas of this scene. It's very jarring for the game to be so forgetful of tone, especially this close to the finale.

Maybe I'm making too big a deal about this. But it really did knock me out of the moment. A custom response from Ellie would have made a lot of difference. If she had picked up the comic with a tired sigh, that could have helped strengthen the overall scene. Instead, it feels like a sweet guitar lick has started playing, while Ellie says, "Fuck yeah! Comic books! Devil skull radical!"

Okay, at this point I'm exaggerating. I can see that. But I really don't like anything about this collectible.

The Final Walk

It's weird to have this new read, now that I suspect some Fireflies may already be in Tommy's camp. My figuring was that Joel would get a year or two of relative downtime, before being faced with a true reckoning. But he might have no time at all. He might be walking into a total shit show.

Alternate Coda

There's a little ending coda that Ashley Johnson and Troy Baker performed at a live event, where Ellie and Joel have a quiet chat in Tommy's camp, and Joel sings her a song. It was never filmed or released, because it's not really intended as cannon; it was just a neat little moment for people who attended the performance.

Despite it being written by Druckmann, I definitely don't think of that coda as the true ending to *The Last Of Us*. The more I think about the situation, the less it seems like Joel got away with anything. There probably aren't a lot of nice moments waiting for him; this whole situation is likely gonna come crashing down with alarming swiftness.

On the other hand, maybe the Firefly graffiti doesn't mean anything. Maybe Firefly

iconography is considered cool, and some teens from Tommy's town spray painted the symbol so they could feel like sweet rebels. But that doesn't really ring true. That graffiti is *right there*; the Fireflies are already here. No matter the larger intent of the author, that little symbol says a lot.

Backpacks

Incidentally, how did Ellie get her backpack back? It was unlikely for Joel to find his own backpack, but its return was somewhat required, from a gameplay perspective. Ellie's backpack was already miraculously returned once before, during the Winter chapter. At this point, these backpacks seem practically spirit-linked to their owners.

Ellie's backpack should probably be gone, abandoned at the hospital. That coulda been cool, as an additional kick to Ellie's balls: Her knife, her letter from her Mom, all gone.

But it's still here, so I take a moment to gander through her stuff. It's a little creepy how this time, Ellie doesn't comment on any of the items. She just looks quietly through her things, trying to figure out how she's gonna broach the subject of a potential psychotic massacre with a potentially psychotic man.

Ah, someday she'll look back, and see that these were the best days of her life.

The Final Climb

Ellie puts her stuff away, and follows Joel as he climbs a hill. The camera drifts naturally toward Tommy's town, rather than requesting an L3 stick push. The "L3" prompt was obviously an attempt not to commandeer the game camera unexpectedly, but I like this automatic camera drift much better.

We're at the final cliff, and Joel's waiting to help me climb up. This is really it -- My last chance to be in control before the ending plays. So, let's see how long I can put this off.

I take a little stroll along the stream... Holy shit! If you walk along the bank, to the little waterfall, you can wade across and find a flamethrower! It's painted pink, with a black skull on it! There's an alternate ending where you can light Joel on fire! Whoah! I can't believe nobody else found this!

Alright, that was obviously a lie. Maybe my worst lie ever. There's nothing left to do but talk to Joel. Or to stare quietly at Tommy's town for awhile.

You know, if you look at Tommy's town closely, you can actually see a few little people walking around. They're so small that they look like SCI-era Sierra characters. Space Quest III era. I'm making a lotta Sierra references, lately. The people are so small that if I'm not close to the tv, I can barely see them. Nobody's in the lookout posts, though.

The longer you stare, the more people get generated. It gets up to about ten folk, just walking around. I notice this because I thought I'd count the number of houses in Tommy's settlement. It's around fifty houses! That's a pretty decent community.

Man, I really am trying to put off this ending. I leave Ellie staring at the town for long enough that the "recharge your flashlight" icon comes up. Bah! Get out of here, you! You're the dumbest, most pointless icon! Don't ruin this moment! I don't need a flashlight! It's the middle of the day! I can't even turn on the flashlight while I'm out here! Go away!

That flashlight recharge system -- Now that we're at the finale, I think I can comfortably ask: What was the point of that? I know early builds of the game had craftable batteries, but once you've taken out the batteries, it'd be better to just let the flashlight work. That shake-to-recharge system caused me nothing but confusion. I've still never seen one of those shakeable flashlights in real life. I rarely used the in-game flashlight -- Maybe my television's contrast setting was wrong. But for my whole first playthrough, I had no idea what that icon was trying to tell me.

Well. That's certainly not the rant I expected to close out on. Let's climb up that hill.

A Farewell To Side Bars

At this point, the main playthrough is over. But I still have a lot of thoughts to impart about the ending, and about the game overall. The direct relevance of these sections is hard to gauge, so from here on out, Side Bars will be suspended. Every section will now be presented as mainline, no matter how dumb and rambly it is.

Are you ready? Okay! Good luck in there, soldier!

The Final Cinematic

Ellie leaps up to grab Joel's hand, and the screen goes black one more time as a cinema loads. I really do like that one second of space before a cutscene starts. I don't know if it's a technical requirement, or if it's to clarify that a movie is about to play. But it's really perfectly timed. Something about it feels good to me.

Joel starts walking toward Tommy's settlement, and Ellie says, "Hey, wait." Then she hesitates, and exhales loudly. Man, I've been there.

I internalize my frustrations a lot, and react to social pressures more strongly than people think I should. Not that you asked. But before a confrontation, my thought is always: *Don't make me have to do this. This could all be avoided, if you could just stop being the way that you're being.*

So what I'm saying is, I can totally relate to having to discuss a human-race-ending lie with a murderer.

Ellie starts telling Joel her story. "Back in Boston, back when I was bitten; I wasn't alone." This story hasn't gone anywhere remotely bad yet, but the look on Joel's face cracks me up. He is supremely wary. He really is a hunter -- He doesn't know what's coming, but his first impulse is that he wants to swiftly end it.

Ellie talks about how she and Riley were together when they got bitten. In my imagination, the scene of their infection is much smaller and quieter than what the Left Behind DLC reveals it to be. I imagined Riley, Ellie, and one Infected, followed by a lot of relatively quiet waiting. Even though Left Behind shows things differently, I still think of that cacophonous DLC finale as mostly a concession to video-gamedom. In my mind, I can't shake the idea that a smaller confrontation is how Ellie's infection *really* happened.

Riley decided there was nothing she and Ellie could do, so they would just wait out their infection together. I always liked the line, "We can be all poetic and just lose our minds together." That seems like a plan a teenager might come up with, and it's actually pretty solid. There's no positive outcome possible, so in the face of certain death, I gotta give Riley credit: Instead of sharing a messy, awful dual-death, she paints the situation almost like a sleepover. Succumbing to infection will be kind of like breaking into a parent's liquor cabinet, or dropping acid for the first time. It's probably gonna be a bad time, but they won't really know until they try it, and at least they'll be together. One last weird, horrible adventure.

Joel touches his watch, and starts giving Ellie some survivor rhetoric. "No matter what, you keep finding something to fight for." She has to cut him off. She gives an exasperated sigh before she says, "Swear to me."

The music starts to swell. It's easy for music to overwhelm a scene; it's amazing to me how perfectly this music rises up. It sets just the right tone. It's a lot, but it's not too much.

I think Ellie knows she's never gonna get the truth from Joel. The best she can do is

corner him into admitting, right now, that he's never gonna tell her the truth. "Swear to me that everything you said about the Fireflies is true."

With only token hesitation, Joel says, "I swear."

The look on Ellie's face is something that didn't hit me strongly at first. But as I learned more about this story, her expression has taken on more and more meaning. In that moment, she's re-writing her whole future.

Replace All

I haven't been involved in any apocalypse-salvation scenarios... yet. But I've been in situations that I think might feel similar to what Ellie is experiencing. You come to a crossroads with someone, and you know that you both have to go in different directions. You know that things can never be like they used to be.

So your mind starts re-writing your plans for the next month, and the next year, and maybe for your whole life. You're over-writing everything that was there, but knowing that it's what you have to do. The change is gonna feel hard later, but in the moment, it's almost a relief. It's a comfort to clarify where you both stand, and to know that you don't have to keep fighting for the old paradigm anymore.

So the new reality spreads across your brain, and to an outside observer, you look like the same two people. But between the two of you, nothing looks the same. Everything is different.

Liars, And The Lies They Use To Construct Their Lie Villages In Lie-Town

So, Joel lied to Ellie. I've heard folk talk about that as though it's the worst thing Joel has ever done. But I think it's clear that those people are lending Joel's lie additional significance, simply because it happens during the story's final moments.

Realistically, in the fullness of Joel's life, lying is pretty much the least bad thing he's done. I mean, he killed a ton of people. Then, he possibly doomed all of humankind. Then, he told a kid a lie. Have some perspective, my lads.

Joel's lie may even be a kindness. The Fireflies wanted to kill Ellie, and Joel wanted to save her. But he also wanted her future to be as safe from the Fireflies as possible. That meant killing soldiers, killing doctors, and killing Marlene. It wasn't pretty, but them's

the circumstances. So while Joel's lie is partially intended to deflect blame and censure away from himself, it's also intended to save Ellie from having to shoulder the weight of what has happened.

As it stands, Ellie strongly suspects that Joel snuck her away from the Fireflies. But she doesn't know that Joel slaughtered a bunch of Firefly soldiers. She doesn't know that Joel killed the surgeon, or that he killed Marlene. She doesn't know that the quest for a cure has been utterly derailed. So she doesn't have to be tormented by that knowledge, and can still harbor hope that a cure will be found in someone else.

Surgeon Census

On that note, let's talk about surgeons.

When discussing *The Last Of Us*, people often talk about the Firefly surgeon as though he was the last surgeon on Earth. But the Earth is a big place. The U.S. government, as shaky as it is, has gotta have a few high-level doctors still in its ranks. It's possible that the Firefly surgeon was more of a renegade doctor, the only one crazy enough to shack up with a rebel group.

Beyond North America, there's the rest of the world to draw from. It's wildly unlikely that Joel killed the world's very last brain surgeon. Books and videos still exist; new people can learn surgery skills. If Ellie is naturally immune, then others will be. It's pleasingly dramatic to suggest that we've been playing as the man who doomed all of humanity, but it doesn't seem very likely.

More likely, those goddamn Fireflies have been running around half-cocked, trying to circumvent all existing systems, and acting like they're the only ones who could develop a vaccine. They granted themselves super-savior status, which allowed them to justify behavior such as killing an innocent kid. Man, fuck the Fireflies. The more I think about them, the more surprised I am by how many players take their side. There's obviously some merit to their research, but that doesn't change the fact that they're some delusional motherfuckers.

Authorial Authority

I was listening to the PlayStation podcast *PS I Love You XOXO* -- On episode 65, hosts Colin & Greg talked about their previous interviews with Neil Druckmann. Druckmann had confirmed to them that the Fireflies would have developed a vaccine, had they been granted access to Ellie's brain.

Colin mentioned how he sometimes prefers not to discuss stories with their creators, because learning additional information can alter his perception of the story. In the case of the Firefly vaccine, he preferred to maintain a layer of ambiguity as to the Fireflies' potential success. Narratively, I think Colin was right (tm). The Last Of Us is the kind of story where additional ambiguity helps, rather than hurts.

But Druckmann's comments didn't affect my view of the narrative. As I've gotten older, I've found it easier to separate art from the artists. After its release, The Last Of Us became a work which stands on its own, outside of the influence of the people who created it. And I don't think there's enough evidence in the story as presented to strongly suggest that the Fireflies would have succeeded in developing a vaccine.

If I may be so bold: It may even be a case of an audience seeing a story more clearly than its originator can. It can be difficult for an author to maintain a strong awareness of the parameters of their own story; the author can see every edit, every previous draft, every unspoken idea. It's much easier for us, as outsiders, to retain a clear vision of the story as it has actually been told. And if evidence for a given theory isn't in a story, then it's not in the story. It becomes just another theory. A premium theory, but a theory nonetheless.

So I remain completely skeptical of the Fireflies' ability to have developed a vaccine. In order for me to think otherwise, the groundwork for that idea would have needed to be laid much more strongly than it was. It doesn't really matter who tells me otherwise, or what their authority within the original project was. They may be sharing interesting ideas, but those ideas ain't the story as I perceived it.

I wonder what would have happened if God had tried to give me the Ten Commandments? "Yeah yeah, you're God. You made the Earth, I get it. But so what? It's already made, dude. Thanks for all the sunsets and shit, but this is as far as our relationship is gonna go. If you wanna hang out, that's cool. But you need to chill it with these *commandments*. Don't get all up in my *business*, dude. You're not my dad."

Dad Mode

Let's talk a bit about dads. Rad old dads. I'd like to meet that dad.

By murdering and lying, Joel has done what he thought was necessary: Firstly to protect Ellie from dying on an operating table, and then to keep her from knowing the extent of the horrors he has perpetrated. Ellie doesn't know the specifics, but she does know she can't trust Joel any more. He sacrificed the relationship between them, in order to

improve her future. That's some dad shit, right there.

Ellie may have been willing to sacrifice herself for the possibility of a cure. But Ellie is a minor; in the view of Joel's old society, she isn't old enough to make these kinds of decisions. A parent has the authority and obligation to act on a child's behalf, to protect that child from predatory practices.

Joel isn't Ellie's friend; he's her guardian. Essentially, he is her dad. Kid, you don't have to like your dad. You don't have to agree with all the choices he makes. He's a very different person from you, and he's doing what he thinks he needs to in order to keep you safe. You crazy-ass teen. Trying to sacrifice yourself to some idealistic, moon-eyed militia -- Where's your head at? Just- go to your room. We'll talk about this later. I said later!

Guilt

I doubt that Joel feels particularly bad about lying to Ellie. I doubt he feels too bad about most of the stuff he's done. Everything's a matter of perspective. Back in Boston, Tess said, "We're shitty people, Joel. It's been that way for a long time." And Joel says, "No, we are survivors!" I think he believes that's true. He doesn't think he's a bad person. He's just doing what he has to do.

The Terror Of The Natural World (An "S" Rank Digression)

One night, I went to the edge of a park in east Toronto, across from Warden Station. The park was unlit and heavily wooded, perfect for peeing. As I whizzed, my gaze drifted upward -- I realized I could see the stars, which is not something you can always do in a city. I like opportunities to be alone in the dark; it feels freaky and cool. I also didn't have much going on that day. So I zipped up, and followed a path into the trees.

The park quickly became pitch black. I could hear occasional traffic in the distance, but besides that, I felt like I was in a different world. The light from my phone was having no effect, so I turned it off. I let my eyes adjust to the darkness, watching the black forms of giant trees loom over me. Above them, in a small patch of sky, I could see the Big Dipper.

I was amazed by how much my hearing perked up. I usually listen to headphones while I walk, but for this adventure, I needed all my senses. The path on one side became an unfenced cliff, which led down into what sounded like a sizable creek. I could also hear

animals everywhere -- I was surprised by how clearly I was able to gauge the size and location of the animals. My head darted directly toward each noise, and some of the rustling sounded big, almost like people moving through the woods.

I assumed that no animals would come near me, being a mighty human. But as I traveled further, I realized that I don't really know shit about animals. City animals tend to keep their distance, but I didn't feel like I was in a city any more.

I eventually came to a t-junction, where the path continued on, while a bridge spanned the creek. I walked slowly across, and wondered if I had the stones to keep going further into the darkness. If someone had jumped out at me then, I would have shit myself, for real and for true.

Then I heard the sound of two guys talking, and froze. I spotted the tiny light of one of their phones -- They were a short distance ahead of me, but getting closer. I stayed immobile. Did I want to try to talk to them? Even a "hello" as I passed would have felt very weird, in this environment where it was too dark to even see their faces.

I wondered, was this how the world felt in the past? If a person were traveling at night, what would they do if they heard someone coming? Would they risk the human interaction? Or would they hide, to wait for the strangers to pass?

I learned that I would hide. I knew these were just a couple of dudes, and that nothing bad was gonna happen. But something inside of me didn't want to make contact. I turned and started walking, going as fast as I could without making sound. I had to hold a tin of mints that was in my pocket, to keep it from rattling.

At the t-junction I continued along the main path, and I could still hear the two people talking, though they were falling further behind. This was a playground version of survivalism, but I still felt afraid. It seemed important that I not be discovered.

After a few minutes I saw streetlights, and suddenly emerged onto a residential street. Even though I'd been in the dark for less than an hour, I felt a real sweep of relief to be back in the normal world. I slowed to a regular walk, and tried to imagine what it would be like to have no society to go back to: What if there were nothing but a dark, scary world, spreading out in all directions? What would it be like to live in a world where every sound meant danger?

I thought about Ellie. Once she left Boston, that was the kind of world she lived in. Her situation was never safe. The only things waiting for her were wild animals, or infected monsters, or human cannibals. And the only person between her and that endlessly huge, terrifying world, was Joel.

The Final Scene

Ellie knows that Joel isn't telling her the truth. But there's nothing she can do about that right now. So she watches him for a long moment, gives an tiny nod, and says, "Okay."

The Technological Bar

Ellie's final facial expression, just before the credits roll, is the face that launched a thousand fan theories. The first time I saw *The Last Of Us'* ending, I was confused by how low key it is. But the more I watch it, the more I like it.

Naughty Dog really has their facial-expression technology down. They use footage of each actor as visual reference, but ultimately hand-tool each expression. It's a method that works really well -- Next to Naughty Dog, the acting in other games feels like it's lagging far behind.

As a random example, I was playing *Spec Ops: The Line*. *Spec Ops* was a surprise hit, a game that came out of nowhere, to unexpected acclaim. I decided to check it out, and it was pretty cool -- It had some plot holes, but I've never seen better loading screens in all my days. Overall, it was definitely more interesting than your average video game.

The overall presentation, however, never felt quite right. In the game's first area, three soldiers talked as they walked together through the desert. The dialogue itself wasn't bad, but it was clear that the actors were not actually walking as they recorded. They were in a sound booth, and the actors' immobility threw off the tone of the conversation.

That may sound like a nit-pick, or an unrealistically high expectation for a video game. But in a movie, the actors would have been walking as they spoke, by necessity. If looped dialogue had been added to the scene, the audience would notice. So why do video games imagine they can get a pass while doing something similar?

The solution would be to get the actors into a Naughty Dog style recording environment, so they could walk together as they performed their dialogue. But almost no developer makes games that way; even acting-heavy games like *Until Dawn* record their motion capture and dialogue separately.

But Naughty Dog records full performances, whenever possible. Their process is well documented; it's easy to find footage of their actors performing on makeshift sound-stages, which is later re-tooled into the finished games. Now that one developer has pulled the trigger on this technique, I don't think it's an outlandish request for others to do the same. No offense to *Spec Ops*, it was just an example that came to mind. Full

offense to Until Dawn, because that game is half-assed as fuck.

But for all games, particularly of higher budgets -- The capturing of a complete performance has been pioneered, and executed at a very high level. So that's the way things should be done, from here on out.

Talent v Luck

The level of technical excellence in Naughty Dog games helps them explore some unusually subtle moments in video game storytelling. There's a lot of personal interpretation possible in the story of The Last Of Us. It could be that you, constant reader, have a very different interpretation of the game than the one I've laid out. I hope someone eventually writes another big-ass book about The Last Of Us, so I can see how our interpretations differ. I'm also looking forward to getting real upset when that future author suggests that people play the game on Easy. Don't be such a wuss, future-guy.

As I mentioned, the Naughty Dog team are clearly talented at crafting facial expressions. But I wonder: Is crafting a perfectly ambiguous facial expression really something that an artist can do? That sounds like a tall order. And I hate to say it, but the overall blandness of Uncharted 4 has caused me to rethink some of my assumptions about The Last Of Us. Video game production is a maelstrom of craziness; could it be that The Last Of Us' artistic achievements came down to a series of happy accidents? Can a team, however talented, realistically be led toward such excellence?

"On today's docket, I need you to work on Ellie's final facial expression. I'd like you to make it perfectly unreadable. I say unreadable, but at the same time, it needs to allow people to read into it whatever personal beliefs they may hold. Cold resignation, trusting optimism, I want all of that to be in there. Yes, I know it's only a five second scene. If you could have that ready by five o'clock, that'd be great. Thanks so much! You deserve twice what we're paying you! But seeing as that's not financially feasible, just get back to work."

Traditionally, games with simpler, more abstract graphics have been better suited to individual player interpretation. It's easier for a player to imprint a personality onto a nondescript shape than it is to identify with a poorly-rendered human. Nothing is more off-putting than the pitiable mess that is the poorly rendered human.

But Naughty Dog seems to have successfully bridged the uncanny valley. With The Last Of Us, players discuss the characters purely as characters, rather than as elements of a video game. We're able to discuss their actions, their relationships, and their motivations, without the additional critical distortion of having to judge their technology.

So ultimately, I retract my suggestion that luck may have been a factor in the success of The Last Of Us. Luck is a factor in everything, but the right situation needs to be in place before luck is even capable of taking hold. So what was my point? I don't know. Jesus christ, I don't know. Holy fuck, this book is long.

So! On to our next semi-cogent topic!

Computer Generated Acting

George Lucas, of all the godawful hacks, talked about something similar to the Naughty Dog method, around the time that Episode One came out. He referenced computer technology as a way to potentially manipulate actors' facial expressions, in order to get precisely the performance he wanted. As the years passed, and as Lucas continued to denigrate the Star Wars franchise, that statement became increasingly frightening. In Lucas' hands, modern technology became like a eugenics tool, able to pervert his films into any mutant form he desired.

Naughty Dog's process functions similarly to what Lucas discussed: A scene in a Naughty Dog game can be manipulated to a degree that traditional film cannot. Naughty Dog animators can tweak facial expressions, can splice together audio from multiple takes, can control camera placement, can control lighting. And in their hands, it works really, really well.

I guess this demonstrates that technology has no inherent morality -- In the hands of a villain, technology can cause great pain. It can be used to bring sorrow to an entire generation. But in the hands of heroes, it can save a generation!

The Last Of Us, to me, brings a sense of transcendence to its medium. We've spent our entire lives obsessed with video games, and it's not always easy to justify that obsession. But a game like The Last Of Us really shows what the video game medium is capable of. When I was a kid, I would sometimes dream about playing video games from the future. Playing The Last Of Us seems like the closest realization of that feeling.

Hard work, genius planning, the Fates... we can never fully grasp the method behind a game's production. But we may be able to make that process a little more clear, by looking at the negative space around the game. We can examine earlier design plans, and see how the game's ultimate outcome might have been different.

The Prototype Ending

Game development seems like an extremely wily process -- There are more moving parts to consider than in any other artform. Documentation of that process can be hard to find, but there are some gems.

The Broken Age documentary series by 2 Player Productions is a great chronicle of the development process of a mid-level video game. The Broken Age doc is like watching people in free-fall, who can only pull their parachute at the last moment. They've planned and designed as carefully as possible, but they can never know for sure if their parachute is gonna work, until it's deployed. It's a great example of the limits of pre-planning in video game development. The situation is always going to change, and the final result will never be quite as envisioned.

The development of The Last Of Us is also fairly well documented, with much more transparency than an average video game. In one interview, Druckmann described an early version of The Last Of Us' plot, and specifically its ending.

Here's the original plot, as I understand it: Tess's gang was trying to get Ellie out of Boston, and enlisted Joel's help. Tess's brother, who was a soldier, got killed during the shenanigans, and Tess blamed Joel. So Joel and Ellie headed off alone to find the Fireflies, leaving Tess behind.

Tess and her gang then chased Joel across the country, ultimately managing to capture him. Ellie was forced to shoot Tess, making Tess the first person who Ellie had ever killed.

The characters in that scenario seem a lot less like real people, and much more like personified themes. Sometimes I like stories like that; I don't need all my characters to be steeped in naturalism. If a character wants to bullheadedly embody some primal concept, I can get behind that.

But for The Last Of Us, moving in a more naturalistic direction was the right choice. Even now, The Last Of Us has a pretty fantastic story, but not as much as in that original plot. The themes of revenge and redemption touched on by the original ending aren't bad, but feel a bit arbitrary. Is there anything about that scenario, or those particular concepts, which is valuable enough to craft a whole story around?

In the original scenario, it's Tess's motivations which are the hardest to justify. In the midst of a crippling apocalypse, she rounds up a posse and chases someone clear across the country. But presumably, her posse would tell her to fuck off. It's too bad that her brother died, but people die all the time. Additionally, Tess's brother was a soldier, a

social class who smugglers generally don't give a fuck about. Tess could probably boss people into doing a lot of things, but a cross-country trek is asking a lot. Realistically, Tess would be on her own.

After a few days of solo trekking, Tess would start to realize how impossible it is to track someone across a continent. Otherwise, the story becomes about how Tess is the most supernaturally driven person in the whole apocalypse, and an amazing detective to boot. She's so rage-filled about her unlucky brother that neither raiders, nor animals, nor Infected, nor simple wet socks are enough to waylay her plans. It would seem less like a person who is angry with Joel, and more like the personification of an angry God. The situation would slip firmly into metaphor territory.

Before that story could carry any real emotional resonance, a player would have to accept the idea of Tess as a Terminator. Maybe some people could buy into that idea, but it wouldn't be to their credit if they could. A lotta people like a lotta bad shit, but that doesn't make it any less bad.

You ever play that game *Life Is Strange*? *Life Is Strange* has some of the worst dialogue since the original *Resident Evil*, but not half as funny. Some of the shit that comes out of those characters mouths makes me feel embarrassed for the human race. But if you look up reviews, there are plenty of players who didn't notice. It's possible to make something which is actively, aggressively bad, but still have plenty of people who think it's just dandy.

I take that detour not only to insult *Life Is Strange*, but to make the point that if Naughty Dog had pursued their original ending, a lot of people would have thought it was okay. Their team would have done the best they could with the material at hand, and certain people would have really liked it. But it wouldn't have been a story a person could really dwell on. It wouldn't feel rooted in real human experience. It wouldn't win every game-of-the-year award, the way the current *Last Of Us* has. And I certainly wouldn't be writing a book about it.

Druckmann had a functional plot, but I love how he didn't settle. The original ending would have required railroading the characters down some very particular paths, rather than letting their actions grow organically out of their situation. It would have had an idea or two to ponder, a little diorama constructed in order to impart some particular lessons. But the current ending is far more meaningful, and blossoms out in far more directions.

The current characters manage to transcend the story they're a part of, making the game's overall message feel much greater. Instead of the story being about a few particular facets of human life, it's *about* human life. It's not a redemption story, or a corruption

story. It's a story about how there are a dozen sides to every story. Druckmann saw how focusing on only one side would require neglecting the others, and retooled his ideas onto a much more natural-feeling path. Nice one, Druckmann!

Autoanalysis

It must be strange for a development team to consider their own creation. As players, we have a clear view of the finished product. We get occasional, small views into the unused characters, or abandoned plot points. We get short descriptions of cut features, and we try to imagine what those features might have been like. But ultimately, the finished piece remains steady in our minds.

To be part of a game's development must feel very different. The developers are aware of all their choices, and saw all the changes as they were being made. Instead of having a single, clear awareness of the finished project, they must see all of the things that are missing. So many potential versions of the game must be living in their minds, that looking at the final game must seem like a kaleidoscope of how things might have been. That must be a crazy feeling.

I can't really relate, because for this project, I mostly just left everything in. Speaking of which:

Fuck Life Is Strange

Diversion time! If you're the guy who wrote Life Is Strange, sorry for making fun of your game. I guess. But jesus christ, dude: Get somebody to help you with that shit. It's like a tone-deaf person trying to sing a song. The setting was cool, the style was cool. But that writing really, really sucked.

As I mentioned, some people think Life Is Strange's writing is just peachy. Maybe you're one of those misguided folk. Maybe you think I should be less hard on that game. The devs tried their best, and at least they were trying something new. Also, English is not their first language. They're more french than my 100% french grandmother. So, give them a break. Don't be such a jerk.

The trouble is, a) I *am* a jerk, and b) They did not try their best. Where The Last Of Us is a perfect example of how video game writing is moving into a new era, Life Is Strange is the kind of shit that has historically relegated video games to the literary ghetto.

The Life Is Strange devs have stated that each of their game's characters began as an

archetype, who was then fleshed out. Well, I've got some bad news: The fleshing out process utterly failed to happen.

Life Is Strange is supposed to be, at its core, a story about the friendship between Max and Chloe. But if there's one honest moment between the two of them, I sure couldn't find it. Chloe keeps talking about how she and Max are *best friends*, but from the moment of their reunion, their every moment is nothing but platitudes and cliches. There's a lot of the characters *telling* us how things are, when the reality is very wooden and unconvincing.

But hey, maybe the writers are just clunky. Writing's hard. It's not really worth the time to rant about someone's innate talent level. However, I think *Life Is Strange* does deserve a rant, because beyond their innate talent-level, the writers also didn't give a shit. And I can prove that they didn't. Exhibit A: Kate Marsh.

Kate Marsh is a character in *Life Is Strange* who, through some ham-handed bullshit, finds herself on a roof-top, threatening suicide. In my playthrough, she totally jumped. I tried to save her, but I hadn't been very nice to any of the characters up to that point. In fact, I did whatever I could to inject a little conflict into their tiresome, paper lives. So, I was sad to see Kate go, but it seemed inevitable. It was unlikely that she would suddenly come to trust me in her final, most troubled moments.

The next scene took place later that same day, in the school principal's office. He had gathered all the major players in Kate's death, and the ensuing conversation seemed oddly light. No one was acting very much like a girl had just killed herself. Instead, everyone was holding tightly onto their predetermined archetypes: Money-obsessed principal, nearly-mindless asshole rich kid, police-state loving head of security. But, whatever. The writing had been side-stepping reality at almost every point thus far, so why should I expect this scene to play out any differently?

Afterward, I went back to see what would have happened if Kate Marsh had been rescued. What I found caused any small goodwill I felt toward *Life Is Strange* to completely evaporate. It also explained why the scene in the principal's office felt so peculiarly light.

If Kate Marsh survives, the game presents *the exact same scene*. There are minor differences: For example, it's stated that Kate is in the hospital, rather than in the *morgue*. But 99% of the dialogue, and the overall tone of the scene, remain completely unchanged.

There's a reason why Steve Gaynor, one of the few great writers in video games, has a podcast called *Tone Control*: Tone is important. When presenting a story, tone is everything. The smallest errors can be enough to capsize a whole ship. Writing is a very

delicate, and very painstaking art.

Would you like a fast-track tip for how to totally destroy the tone of your story? Here's a plan you can try: *Take the coda for a rescue scene, and use it as the coda for a suicide scene.* For fuck's sake, Life Is Strange. Fuck you. Try to give a shit. Try to respect my time *just a little*. Fuck! What a shitty fucking game. The lack of care about that story's tone, within a game that is entirely about narrative, fills me with disdain.

If a writer or developer is really making an earnest effort, and it doesn't work out, I still won't like their game. But I can at least respect their attempt. When someone uses the same cut-and-pasted scene following either outcome of a *mother-fucking suicide attempt*, they can go to hell. That is a writer doing a deliberately bad job. That is taking the very notion of storytelling, of character, of representing the struggle of people living life on Earth, and wiping their ass with it. To put it simply, that's an indisputable example of someone not caring. And in art, that is the biggest sin. It might be the only sin. It's not okay to make half-hearted art.

If you're not gonna care about your art, then honestly, don't bother. Find some other job to do as you wile away your days. I've heard the excuses: They've gotta get the episodes out on time. There are only so many resources available. Well, I don't see Kentucky Route Zero worrying about getting the episodes out on time. Not coincidentally, Kentucky Route Zero is a great game. If you want to produce things in the way that a contractor would, then maybe you should build houses. You shouldn't be making art. Art isn't something that should be "good enough". "Good enough" IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH.

Players are so forgiving of bad writing in video games, and I just can't do it. It's rare that writing is provably, demonstrably bad, but Life Is Strange is one of those cases. When writers do something *that fucking egregious*, all I wanna do is rub their nose in it. I wanna treat them like bad dogs. Fuck you, Life Is Strange. Don't ever pull shit like that. If you're gonna kill a kid, at least act like it meant something. At least act like you cared a little bit about anything that you were presenting.

Seriously, Life Is Strange: Get the fuck out of here with your lazy bullshit. You need to skate better.

Literary Task Mastering

I wish I could take my black & white thinking -- "splitting", I think they call it -- and apply it to a career as a literary taskmaster. When a person or studio doesn't possess the internal pressure required for their work to improve, I would love to fulfill that role. I

would love to be the gatekeeper of quality.

If I were gatekeeper, shit writing would not make it out the office door. Nothing would make it into the world until I could look at it without feeling repulsed. We could release it later, in a making-of doc, and have a good laugh at our early, terrible ideas. But those ideas would not be the final product. I'd break my fucking back before that happened.

Man, I'd be great at that job.

Sitcom Formulae

There's a fancy word, eh? "Formulae". So, listen: We're already in the weeds. I stopped talking about *The Last Of Us* a dozen paragraphs ago. So let's travel a little deeper into abstraction-land. Let me tell you about a dream I had.

I was dreaming about sitcoms, and I woke up thinking about their story structure. Sitcoms are designed to function as narrative treadmills -- There's an initial setup, and that basic situation can then be iterated on, for years.

When a show has run its course, its eternally-static situation can finally be resolved. That finale can sometimes have a respectable level of meaning. It's not unusual for a sitcom finale to draw some touching moments, out of what had previously been a light situation.

From the tearful drama of the *M.A.S.H.* finale, to the deliberately staid emotional evenness of the *Cheers* finale -- The ending of a popular sitcom can become a North American cultural touchstone. It's a chance for everyone to gather 'round their tv sets, and give a final nod to characters who had become a part of our national routine.

Sitcoms aren't viewed as having much literary value. But the narrative trick they pull is pretty unique. They use recursive stories, in which no particular episode is of particular importance, which can then transform into a story which carries a greater overall resonance.

Not everyone is going to see every episode of a sitcom. They might not see most episodes. I stopped watching *Friends* after season one, but I still had no problem following the finale. When that big, final wrap-up happens, it can pay off for all levels of investment, from the casual fan, to the hardcore.

So what the fuck does this have to do with video games? I'm not exactly sure, but here's what I was thinking:

Video game storytelling is clearly a delicate and difficult art. There is no single path forward; as good as *The Last Of Us* is, it's not like it cracked some kind of code. *The Last Of Us* worked for what it was trying to accomplish, but the next game needs to try something different, and the next game something different still. If there's any constant to be found, it's that the best video game storytelling tends to be that which is tied closely to the given game's mechanics.

Still in a dreamy fog, my thoughts drifted to video game mechanics. Game mechanics are generally a cyclical process: There's the "essential gameplay loop", a small set of interactions which the player repeats, with minor variation, until the game is done. Different players will take different amounts of time to reach a game's conclusion; they'll see different parts of the game, and pay different amounts of attention to what they see.

In my haze, the process of playing a game and watching a sitcom seemed very similar. Both forms have what I'd refer to as a "non-captive audience". In sitcoms, there is no expectation that an audience will be familiar with each, or even most of the episodes. When players play games, gaming's non-linear nature inevitably leads to vastly different levels of overall plot awareness. Some players skip cutscenes outright, and most players don't make it to the end of a game at all.

Video game writers seem eternally stymied by this set of circumstances. Video games tend to follow the "captive audience" structure of film storytelling, which has led to much conflict between story and medium, and rarely has satisfying results. Games present a story as though the audience is paying strict attention, when that is rarely the case.

Meanwhile, sitcom writers have found a way to not only navigate the problem of a non-captive audience, but have learned to thrive there. Maybe video games could do something similar? Sitcoms involve storytelling within a recursive situation, just as video games involve storytelling within a recursive situation. Perhaps video games could find ways to emulate some of sitcoms' success.

On the surface, the most obvious difference between sitcoms and video games is that sitcoms tend away from seriousness, while video games tend away from comedy. Would emulating a sitcom also require moving away from melodrama? Or do more serious shows, like crime procedurals, follow the same overall formula as sitcoms? I'm not sure. I'm starting to wake up, now. I wish I had a clearer idea of what I'm actually trying to suggest.

I really don't know how to meld recursive storytelling into a video game. But I feel like maybe there's something there. Even though the idea came from a weird dream, it keeps

hanging around in my brain.

Also, I just realized that my eyes and ears are bleeding, so I better go to the hospital. In the event that I don't make it, I'm gonna try to spread this idea, by whispering to the EMT: "Hey -- Using a sitcom formula to present a story in a video game... What... What do you think about that..?"

And as I slip away into death, he'll say, "No, man. That sounds fucking stupid."

Time To Focus

Sooooooo... What were we talking about? The ending of *The Last Of Us*, right? In the days before written language, I'm sure no one could have rambled on at this kind of insane length. The audience would interject, probably by throwing rocks. I bet writing was invented by a guy who loved having long, one-sided conversations, but who got annoyed that no one was willing to listen to him. So he wrote down all his rambling, then said, "Here it is! Here's every thought I ever had! Now sit down, and read it! Read it forever!" God bless that man.

Maybe I'm trying to avoid getting to the end of this book. I've been writing it for so long... what will it be like for it to be finished? If you've read all the way to this point, you've probably had similar feelings. But we've gotta soldier on! We've gotta wrap this all up!

Ah! Rejuvenating! In my opinion, too few books include intermittent pep-talks.

Death As A Finale

I kicked off this book with a rant against spoiler-culture, and I'd like to reiterate that stance. There's an excessive level of spoiler-fear in contemporary nerd culture, and I find it very tiresome. When people caw about spoilers, they're invariably cawing about not wanting to learn which characters have died. There seems to be very little spoiler-worry directed toward a story's larger themes or actual meaning.

If you're the type of person who's overly concerned about spoilers, there are two solutions.

Solution Number One! You have to go full nerd. You have to watch every movie immediately, and play every video game directly upon release. You've gotta put your money where your complainy mouth is. If that level of dedication doesn't seem attainable, then

maybe you don't care about this bullshit as much as your online whining would suggest that you do.

And that's a good thing! Because, Solution Number Two! You need to re-evaluate how much it matters to learn a spoiler. Maybe you find out that Professor Dickhead gets decapitated in episode five of Fuckfaces, Inc -- So what? Does that knowledge actually mean anything?

I once sat down and tried to think of a spoiler that had really bummed me out to learn. I thought back as far as I could, and I couldn't come up with anything. As I said, spoilers are almost always about a character's death, and as I get older, character deaths carry way less resonance for me.

It's very en vogue to kill characters. It's usually used as an emotional shortcut, to imbue a story with meaning. "Whoah, did you hear what happened? Professor Dickhead died! In episode five! I didn't think that'd happen until the season finale, at least!"

The reality is that a character's death doesn't mean anything, besides that that character's story is now over. The only meaning behind a character's death is in how it effects the remaining characters. But there are so many "unexpected" deaths in recent popular media, that it's clear how negligible such narrative follow-through tends to be. It sounds weird to say, but a character's death doesn't really mean that much. Finding out "who lives and who dies" is really not something worth getting yourself into a twist over.

A Perfect Swan Dive Out The Window

A character death during a story's finale is especially polarizing. On the surface, it's hard to conceive of a more emotionally affecting ending. But for deeper analysis, there's no event which can seem more pointless. There's no opportunity to elaborate on what that character's death actually meant.

Remember how Anya died in the finale of Buffy: The Vampire Slayer? That was weird, huh? I mean, I guess it was sad. But then the story was over. So, why bother? Why not let her live? What did her death actually mean?

(Maybe Anya's passing was elaborated on in the Buffy: Season 8 comics. But let's be honest -- Those took place in a *castle*. Those don't really count.)

The first time I remember the death of a main character feeling distinctly exasperating, rather than moving, was when I read Death Of A Salesman in high school. I got to the end of that dopey play and thought: Okay. So this dickhead is dead. So what? What does

that really mean? Death of the American Dream, blah blah blah. My teacher certainly had a lot of regurgitated horseshit to say about it.

But to me, Willie Loman was just a jerkoff. His death left no impression on me whatsoever. Predictably, me and my English teacher did not become the greatest of friends during these discussions.

I'm impressed by how spoiler-proof The Last Of Us is. You can lay out who lives and who dies, but that will only remotely describe the actual story. The main spoiler is that there is no spoiler. Neither of the main characters die. They both make it to the end, safe and sound.

Survival is still the main theme of The Last Of Us, but the audience needs to dig deeper into these characters, in order to understand how and why they survived. What were the actions which led to their survival? And what psychological states caused them to take those actions?

A death ending, when well executed, can feel big. It can tug at the ol' heartstrings. It can remind us that the clock is ticking on our own lives, which can be a valuable message. But in the long-term, it doesn't leave a lot to ponder. The book is closed on that narrative.

If the characters all survive, a story can initially feel smaller. The story can seem to lack gravitas, having not doled out a fireworks display of memento mori and self-pity. But these seemingly smaller endings can leave the audience with much more to chew on, and can have a much longer tail.

Sticking The Landing

It's actually quite bizarre to find such a strong example of a subtle ending, in a medium as narratively stunted as video games. The Last Of Us achieves a level of craft that is not only above its contemporaries, but also stands toe-to-toe with other storytelling artforms. The overall story of The Last Of Us may not necessarily challenge the classics of other mediums, but its ending definitely could.

Ellie says, "Okay." That's the last moment of The Last Of Us. God dammit -- That is so fucking crazy. Who would have the balls to do that? What initially seems like one of the slightest endings in video games, ends up being one of the endings most fertile for discussion. It's been years since the game's release, and I'm still impressed by its ending.

I've always put a lot of stock into endings. A great ending can really make or break a

story. A mediocre ride can be worth it for a great ending, and a great ride can be a real let-down, if the ending is mediocre. But it's rare to find an ending which seems initially insufficient, but which gradually becomes greater and greater. That's a risky thing to even attempt.

When I'm considering someone else's writing, I often think about whether or not I feel I could improve it. That's probably pretty egotistical of me, but I'm guessing you've picked up on that particular character flaw by now.

If a work has consistently tone-deaf writing, it really gets me down. I can't stop wishing that I could get in there, and do some re-writes. But it makes me really happy when I find writing that I don't think I could improve. I imagine being a punch-up guy, and saying, "Nope, it's good. Don't change anything. This kid knows how to write. Give them a raise. Give them every raise, and fire everyone else."

With the ending of *The Last Of Us*, not only do I feel unqualified to make alterations -- I didn't even know a person could successfully write an ending like that. "Confident", is how people describe it, and I think that's the right term. *The Last Of Us* has a crazily confident ending. It's rare to learn a lesson of this caliber, and to learn it from a video game? Get out of here. Get *right the fuck out of here*.

Maybe it makes sense to find such an unusual ending in a video game; maybe movies and novels have become formulaic, and less likely to blaze new trails. Whereas video games are a total shit-show, and there, anything can happen. Maybe it's not so weird that a spark of genius rose from such a morass of awful shit.

But, nah. Who am I kidding? It's totally weird. I'm suspicious that Naughty Dog might have built some manner of Sliders machine, which they've used to Slide into a parallel reality. In this other reality, video games are much, much better than they are here. So they grabbed a copy of *The Last Of Us*, and they brought it back to our world, where it won all of our Game Of The Year awards. Our Earth's feeble offerings of *Grand Theft Auto 5* and *Bioshock: Infinite* were no match for this mighty game from another world, a world far more advanced than our own.

The existence of a Sliders machine may seem unlikely. But it's the only way that this quantum leap in narrative quality makes any goddamn sense.

I'm having a hard time recalling other endings which display this level of restraint, even outside of video games. Stories with vague endings aren't hard to find; what's hard to find are small endings, which then give way to a huge level of residual value. That's basically unheard of, at least in my oafish life.

Neil Druckmann has made direct reference to the film *No Country For Old Men*, as an example of the kind of ending he was hoping to achieve. But to me, the two endings are not of comparable value. *No Country For Old Men* feels like the art-film version of a stunt ending. It beats the audience over the head with its vagueness.

With *No Country*'s final, quiet monologue, there's no question of anyone missing that this is an Unconventional Ending. But it's an ending which doesn't give way to much additional meaning. "Life sure is crazy, huh?" ol' Tommy Lee coulda said. "Just a lotta crazy stuff in life. No rhyme or reason. Certainly no structure. Yessir. You just walk around for awhile, various events happen, and then you die. Okay, well. I guess I'll head to bed, then."

Endings like that aren't very impactful to me. They seem designed to allow fake-smart people to have an outlet through which to act fake-smart. You can look up theories and discussions about the meaning of these vague endings, but you won't find much to sink your teeth into. You'll just find a certain type of scholar, who has a hard time admitting that there might not be much there to discuss.

Softer Coda

Writing "Softer Coda" makes me think of that Faith No More song "Faster Disco". You ever hear that song? Arr, my brain... hold it together, son. You're talking about nothing again.

I've said an absurd amount of nice things about the ending of *The Last Of Us*. But as I've mentioned, it was an ending that initially left me a little cold. That seems to be a not-uncommon reaction; beyond the lack of a protagonist's death, the ending also lacked the classic "finale tone" that one has come to expect.

Even without changing the specifics of the ending, I expected the final moments to have a softer feel. I expected a wide shot, with the camera drifting slowly away as Joel and Ellie walked together into the distance. That's a common shot, and the kind that would suggest an uncoiling of tension. It would be a clear signal that our adventure was over. Despite all the crazy stuff that had gone down, the world was still spinning. Things were gonna be okay. I had no *reason* to expect the game to end that way. That's just... what stories *do*.

During one point in production, the game did close on a more conventional wrap-up note. I can't remember where I read that, but I haven't been citing my sources so far, so why start now? But it does make sense that Druckmann would have experimented with a more conventional send off.

The Gentle Finale has been burned into our collective unconscious. We harbor an internal sense of how a story should end; we made it through, and our payoff is a moment of peace. We can imagine that all of life's problems are now tied into a nice narrative bow. It's over, and our reward is that we don't have to worry about the implications of this story anymore.

It's surprising how gentle an ending can feel, even when the reality of the situation is far from resolved. A calming message can be sent through the camerawork, through the filmmaking cues, through the music; no matter what's gone on in the actual story, the other aspects of the production can work to present a subtext of relief. But *The Last Of Us* did not give us that. *The Last Of Us* just cut to black, like the son of a bitch that it is.

My sense of unease with *The Last Of Us*'s ending mirrored how I felt many times during my first playthrough. I played on Hard difficulty (as I won't shut up about), and I didn't have a great grasp of the combat mechanics. Some of the battles took me many, many tries. I always felt starved for resources, and whenever two big fights happened back to back, I felt exhausted and demoralized. It was a tiny taste of how Joel must have felt, trying to make his way through the brutality of the post-apocalypse. At certain points, I questioned whether it was really worth putting myself through another round of abuse.

So I shouldn't have been surprised when the ending gave me a similarly hopeless feeling. *The Last Of Us* had been kicking me in the dick for the last fifteen hours -- Why did I expect that kicking to relent at the end?

It's an oversimplification to call the game's final moment soft, or harsh -- It felt confusing. It didn't give us a reassuring pat on the back, but it also didn't openly confirm any future hardship. Joel kept Ellie alive, and they both made it to safety. Particularly given his poor odds in the situation against the Fireflies, Joel managed to escape with everything he could reasonably want. Ellie was safe, and he had a stable community to return to.

But instead of endorsing Joel's actions, or yanking the rug out from under him, the ending does something less obvious. It fails to make any direct comment, which leaves the player able to list either way. It could be presumed that the worst of the storm is over. Or, it could seem quietly clear that Joel's security is temporary, and that he will not retain anything he has.

It must have been tough to end the game in such an unconventional way, rather than with a traditional, tension-easing finale. It would have felt satisfying to let the camera pull out, and to leave the player with a sense of reward, rather than of unease.

But Naughty Dog tried that traditional ending, and they rejected it. The team saw that

salvation is not what this story is about. They saw that relief is not what this story is about. I really respect the hell out of that. I could definitely imagine myself going with a more gentle coda, or of resorting to a protagonist-killing tear-jerker finale. But to walk so carefully down a middle path must have been very hard to conceive of, and even harder to commit to.

Druckmann has said, in some phantom interview which I again cannot reference, that he did not expect the ending to be particularly well received. He had braced himself for a lot of people to hate the ending he had devised. I'm glad that's not what happened. I often question the video game community, and their tragically awful taste in narrative. But maybe gamers deserve a bit more credit. By and large, people seem to have accepted and understood this ending. As I've mentioned, The Last Of Us won enough Game Of The Year awards to fill a bathtub factory. Druckmann and co. took a chance, and it really paid off. That's a great thing. That feels real good.

So ultimately, maybe The Last Of Us did have a happy ending! Whoah! It's a double-triple cross! Styling... you know you are styling...

The Singing Coda

There are whispers and legends that speak of yet another coda. A coda so sweet, it could burn you alive, like a vampire in the sun. That's not descriptive enough. Like a vampire who failed to heed the Sonic The Hedgehog seizure warning, and then seized all up, and stumbled... into the sun. Is that better? That might be worse. Look, let's all acknowledge that by continuing to read this book, I'm clearly playing some kind of weird joke on you. This book just keeps going and going.

The secret coda was performed at One Night Live, where the game's actors performed select scenes from The Last Of Us in front of a live audience. You can see the event on YouTube, and it's a pretty interesting watch. I always thought The Last Of Us would make for a cool play, so a stage performance is neat to see. At the same time, it shows how carefully tweaked the performances in the game are; during a single, unedited performance, the nuance of some scenes becomes a bit blurry. Overall, though, I dug it.

I gotta mention that whoever was on lights that night was clearly unfamiliar with The Last Of Us. He cut to black before the end of not one, but *two* scenes. Stuff like that drives me nuts. This is happening *one time*. If you're not gonna do your part correctly, then step aside, and let someone who fucking gives a shit take over. If I was in charge, I woulda been so mad at that guy. I woulda lashed him with words so acidic, he woulda burned like a goddamn vampire who attached his Sega Genesis to a rear-projection television, and who burned the image of Columns onto his dad's sweet home theater.

At the end of the night, after the cameras had stopped rolling, and just before the lighting guy was violently reprimanded, the live audience was treated to one more scene. Details are vague, because incredibly, everyone in attendance respected Neil Druckmann's wish that no one record what they were about to see.

This secret scene takes place a few weeks after the ending of *The Last Of Us*. The scene checks in with Joel and Ellie, who've been living in Tommy's town. Joel comes to see Ellie; he's aiming to reconnect, as he's noticed that the two are growing somewhat distant. After some small talk, Joel breaks out a guitar and plays a song, the lyrics of which are rich with meaningful overtones.

Joel then lightens the mood by telling a bad joke. "What's the toughest thing about eating a clock? It's time consuming." Ellie laughs, and Joel bids her good night. Ellie then strums the guitar, her mind no-doubt swirling with the bitter-sweetness of their embattled relationship. I assume the lighting guy also cuts the lights before the scene is done, so that the final moments happen in complete darkness.

That ending is what I'd call a super-gentle send-off. It's a small, meaningful moment between two people who have been through a lot together. It's a confirmation that though they may be drifting apart, Joel and Ellie will always be an important part of each other's lives. It's basically the exact kind of ending I had originally thought I'd wanted. But hearing it described, I realized that it's more like a vampire on a Slip 'N Slide, slipping right out the door and into a bright, sunny day.

Don't get me wrong: I'm glad they performed this scene. It sounds like a nice moment, and it's an interesting scenario to consider. But I'm happy that it wasn't filmed. Despite Druckmann having written the scene, it really does feel like *Last Of Us* fan fiction. Druckmann confirmed as much by saying it was not a deleted scene, nor anything ever intended to be in the game itself.

Instead, it's a sweet goodbye to characters who the team had spent years working with. It's Druckmann the fan, giving his characters the kind of send-off that he as producer would not allow himself to give. It doesn't feel cannon to the story, and being unfilmed, it essentially doesn't exist. It survives only in myths and dreams, and in late-stage chapters of overlong books.

My main issue with the Singing Coda is that, emotionally speaking, it lets Joel off the hook. You can feel the hand of the author, and it's an author who is firmly in Joel's corner. The game itself did not feel that way; the game remained largely agnostic to the actions and motivations of its characters. There was no obvious delineation between hero and villain. Joel was the focus of the story, but beyond that, there was little evidence of the story being on his side.

Druckmann gave a great keynote talk in Toronto, which you can find on YouTube, about the process of creating an independent character. He said that the last step in Ellie's independence is realizing that she can't rely on Joel, and I agree. The two of them are basically on their own from here on out.

The guitar coda doesn't negate that outcome. But it does what a soft coda is designed to do: It suggests that the audience need not consider those harsher outcomes. It lets the audience off the hook. Joel's just a tough old guy, who went through some tough old times. Sure, he fucked up a lotta people. He mighta fucked up the whole human race. But, look -- His daughter died! Give him a break! Ellie may be drifting away from him, but hey... he's a good old man. Listen to him sing. Listen to him siiiiiiing...

Whereas the original ending suggested: You can think what you want about Joel. But the fact is that he's a liar and a murderer, and you shouldn't forget that. Credits.

I did like hearing about this secret, alternative finale. It sounds like it was a great moment for those who got to see it. But as a legitimate moment from Joel and Ellie's life, it doesn't ring true. It's too light, and too easy. And those ain't terms which are otherwise associated with *The Last Of Us*.

The Last Of Us: Part II

It took me about two years to write this book, but editing has added more time still. In the time since I began, *Left Behind* was announced. Then, *The Last Of Us: Remastered*. And now, *The Last Of Us: Part II*.

I think it's best to keep the purview of this book focused solely on the first game; I'll continue to discuss the ending from the perspective of it being a self-contained story. The Part II reveal trailer seems to suggest that Joel and Ellie have remained together, but any speculation at this point is premature.

However, the Part II reveal trailer does affect the One Night Live coda. Druckmann insinuated, at a panel at PlayStation Experience 2016, that the One Night Live coda may now be a canonical part of the larger *Last Of Us* story. That's okay with me; I questioned the scene's effectiveness as an ending, but as part of a continuing tale, it's pretty cool.

The Last Of Us stands incredibly well on its own, and there's always concern that a sequel will diminish the original. But I'm very happy for this story to continue. Now I just have to make sure this book is actually released before Part II comes out. Wish me luck.

The Shawshank Coda

Talking about the One Night Live coda, and emotionally satisfying codas in general, makes me think of The Shawshank Redemption. Andy and Red reuniting is one of the greatest movie moments ever. When I saw it, I cried and cried. The Shawshank Redemption became my favorite movie, challenged only by a Canadian werewolf film called Ginger Snaps. Again, I am not a cultured man. But fuck you, Ginger Snaps is amazing. It's a metaphor, man. It's, like, a buncha metaphors.

In Stephen King's story *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption*, the ending is a lot more ambiguous. The story ends with Red trying to cross the border into Mexico, hoping that he'll find his friend Andy. Some of the harsher, more British critics have argued that the film should have ended the same way. Rather than answering the question as to whether the two would reunite, it would end on a note of hope that they would.

Frank Darabont initially agreed; the original cut of the film ended just as the novella did, with Red about to cross the border. In a rare case of test audience utility, the test audiences lost their minds. After the decades of hardship they had watched Red and Andy endure, audiences were desperate for a clear emotional payoff. An additional scene was filmed, where Red meets Andy on the beach. And unless you're a British film reviewer, everyone was very pleased with the result.

The Last Of Us seems like a similar situation. We've spent a year with Joel and Ellie, watching them suffer through hardship after hardship. Don't they deserve to walk serenely into the setting sun? Why would I deny them that moment, when it's something that I wanted so strongly for Andy and Red?

It comes down to the type of story being told. Andy Dufresne didn't do anything wrong. He was an innocent man, and fully deserved whatever happy ending could be afforded him. Red wasn't innocent; he cut the brake line in his wife's car, and she died. But we never see these actions; it's clear that Shawshank is not about the evil that men do. It's about redemption in the wake of those actions. So after watching Red spend decades in prison, we feel that he too has earned his place on a beach in Mexico.

Joel has earned no such redemption. Joel murdered, and murdered, and murdered again. The fact that he lives inside a video game obviously helped to inflate his numbers -- The "real" Joel would have only killed a fraction of the people that video game Joel has killed. But at his best, Joel is still the worst. Players are free to choose their level of acceptance of Joel's actions, but to have any insinuation of redemption baked into Joel's story would be too much. He has in no way earned that status, and in fact, did not even try to earn that status.

I love the character of Joel. He's one of the greatest ever. But fuck Joel. You can't be a colossal, murdering prick, and also get a gold watch and a retirement plan at the end of your run. We the players might like to see a softer finale, because for us, the credits have rolled. For us, the story is done. But for the actual nightmare that is Joel's life and Joel's personality, the curtain is nowhere near being closed. To cast a positive judgment at this point would feel very disingenuous.

If you haven't seen *The Shawshank Redemption*, or for that matter *Ginger Snaps*, I recommend them both. I'm betting you haven't seen *Ginger Snaps*. It's a werewolf movie from Canada, for christ's sake. But for movies about siblings who used to be friends, until one of them turns into a monster... it don't get much better than that. Metaphors, man. Metaphors are the shit.

I've been pretty hard on Joel. But that's one of the things I love about *The Last Of Us* -- It's a story about a murderer which doesn't pretend that the character isn't a murderer. That's why I could never get into all those Steven Seagal movies. That, and other reasons. But let's give a little focus to the nicer side of Joel. I think we've got time. What's that? You've got somewhere to be? Well, not me.

Character Nuance

There's a black and white simplicity to most characterization in fiction. Joss Whedon may be my favorite non-dead writer, and his characters are often lauded for being multi-faceted. But his characters can still be easily described in a sentence. They tend to fall into very clear archetypes.

I use my beloved Joss as an example to show that straightforward characterization is not limited to average writers. Even great writers tend to use fairly narrow characterization, particularly when working in film or tv. It's almost a requirement of those types of media.

If you watch movies or tv shows in fast-forward, it's shocking to see how much dialogue is involved. It's scene after scene of characters talking to each other. Try it out, it's ridiculous. Somehow, at normal speed, the amount of conversation doesn't seem as obvious. But really, talking is all there fucking is. Movies and tv shows are essentially conversation simulators.

Characters need clearly defined boundaries in order to suit the needs of that dialogue-based storytelling. When a character acts outside of their predetermined boundaries, it seems off-putting. Instead of the character seeming more realistic, it seems like a circuit that's failing to connect.

Shoe Leather

In tv and movies, anything that's not dialogue or direct action tends to be removed. One conversation cuts directly to the next conversation, one action leads directly to the next action. A term for those extraneous segments is "shoe leather", referring to the inanity of showing a character walking from place to place. Unless it's a fancy art film, nobody wants that kind of pacing.

In even the longest, most epic television series, we're rarely presented with especially complex characters. We may spend a lot of time with those characters, but that time is spent in very limited ways. Besides an occasional small divergence, characters mainly follow the conversational protocol of their particular personality type, until the day when the show becomes unprofitable.

We definitely don't spend hours watching characters search through detritus, looking for scraps that may help them survive. We don't spend days and nights with them, walking across the landscape. We don't sort through the objects in their backpack. We don't get to *know* characters, the way we do in video games.

Video games *do* show the characters walking from place to place. They show *all* of the shoe leather. They wear those shoes *out*. Actions which movies would consider mundane can be shown in a video game, and can actually be fun to experience.

The Last Of Us is a great example of this. It has many segments that are purely exploratory, and those sections are an opportunity to examine the state of the world. They're also an opportunity to see Joel and Ellie being together. That simple, quiet bonding time, which a movie would not be able to adequately represent, is presented much more fully in a video game format.

If we're being honest, most of what a video game character does is merely walking. But video game characters also take part in other narratively unconventional activities: Listening to music in Heavy Rain, contemplating a spitting contest in Monkey Island... Even Max from Life Is Strange, sitting on a bench and rattling off her interminable thoughts. Video games can be a prime arena for exploring unusual facets of a character.

Production Complacency

Video game technology is constantly changing, and the unique strengths of the medium are not always easy to recognize. We're still at the start of the journey, and due to the continuous growth of the form, we may *always* be at the start of the journey. But within that chaos, unique storytelling opportunities definitely exist. In a way, the chaos of video

game production is a positive thing, because it requires a high level of mental engagement. Game productions can fail, or be canceled -- If things don't go well, millions of dollars can be spent on projects that no one will ever see.

Movies aren't like that. I've heard directors talk about the machinery of the movie business: How once the process has begun in earnest, it will not stop. The production will grind away until a finished movie comes out the other side, no matter how terrible that movie may be. Replace the director, hire a bigger special effects team -- Do whatever you have to do to keep the machine moving. But no matter how much the process fails at any given step, and no matter how many things go wrong along the way, a salable film will still be produced. The machinery is refined to the point where it essentially cannot fail.

As a result, I'm sure you've noticed that there are a lot of incredibly bland movies. There's little chance of a catastrophic failure, which to the money-men must be a great relief. But with so little room to maneuver, there's also little opportunity to experiment. There are a lot of movies that I love, but under a pass/fail grading system, I'd give movies as a whole a "fail". If someone suggests watching a random movie, I would really rather not. It's just gonna be the same old shit, over and over.

Video games, in contrast, require a much higher level of focus during their production. Even the most bland video game is a massive tangle of technical hurdles. If a high level of attention isn't brought to the process, that process will not be completed.

Perhaps as a result of the difficulty of production, there are a lot of bad video games. But under that same pass/fail system, I'd give video games a "pass". Video games are doing new things. Video games are trying crazy shit. When a video game is bad, it can be an affront to God and the Devil both. It can make babies on other planets cry. But there's a good chance that, to be so bad, it tried to do something *different*.

A failed video game may be unbearably bad, but when a video game is good, it can be a revelation. Movies are following the same old trails, whereas video games are hacking their way through unexplored jungle. I don't know that video games necessarily want to be hacking through that jungle; with annualized releases, there's a clear attempt being made to normalize the process of video game production. But that streamlining is never gonna solidify. Assassin's Creed had to eventually take a break, and Call Of Duty ended up in fucking outer space. The parameters of the medium are always changing, and technological complexity forces the situation to remain fluid. Complacency and video game production do not go together.

If the purpose of narrative art is to create a stylized reality, and to use that setting to present some facet of the experience of being alive, then I think truly new and tran-

scendent moments will come from video games. Not through the traditional Great White Hope of branching narratives, but instead through the totality of the experience that can be presented. Video games are a place where detailed characters can flourish. Video games can simulate the overall process of existing within an environment, from its highs to its lows, while remaining entertaining and engaging. Video games allow an audience to digest a wide spectrum of experiences, which are largely indigestible in other media.

Presently, those experiences tend to involve a lot of shooting people in the face. But like I said, we're at the start. We're eternally at the start. Video games, being tied directly to human technology, are a puzzle that can never be solved. But inside the pressure of that unsolvable conflict, great storytelling has a chance to flourish.

Nice Guy Joel

As an example of nuanced storytelling, let's use... Oh, I dunno... The Last Of Us. Fuck it.

In The Last Of Us, the twist is that Joel is the bad guy. The big reveal! Oh, man! This guy you've been playing as the whole time -- He denied humanity a cure for a brutal pandemic! What an asshole!

In most stories, you could get away with using that as the whole slug line. "Extra! Extra! Protagonist proves to be evil! Mankind doomed!" But in The Last Of Us, that's really not a sufficient description of the situation.

(Psst... hey Keith... that's not what a "slug line" is. You meant "headline".)

(Dude, shut up. Don't write notes to yourself in the middle of the book.)

It's probably a little strong to call the ending of The Last Of Us a "twist". Joel has been an openly murdering prick throughout. But a broad-stroke description of him as "evil", or as the villain, doesn't strike me as appropriate. Within the collapsed society where he lives, Joel is actually not that bad a guy. If he were any softer, he would probably not be alive, which makes it a little tough to fully hold his murderousness against him. When kill-or-be-killed is the new social paradigm, a killer is no longer extraordinary. A killer becomes just another person.

Reductive Characterization

Drawing a box around a particular aspect of human behavior, and trying to use that

single attribute to describe a person, is not gonna result in a particularly valid description of that person. That was a mouthful, but lemme explain with this weird example:

Sometimes, I like to read about mental disorders on Wikipedia. That's what Wikipedia's for: Reading about weird shit. Look up "Top Serial Killers By Country", if you want to have a real creepy evening.

So I'll be reading about some mental condition and think, "That seems to relate to someone I know." Or, "That seems to relate to *me*." The descriptions of certain disorders can seem totally on the money, and for a moment, it seems like a gigantic truth has fallen into place. By understanding a particular disorder, I feel like I have a person (or myself) totally nailed.

But the more I think about it, the more I see the ways in which that condition *doesn't* relate to the person. It may be an aspect of their personality, but it doesn't solve the whole mystery of who they are. People just aren't that simple.

But What If They Are That Simple?

For the sake of argument, let's pretend that a person or situation *can* be understood, by focusing on a single facet. Let's take the most sensationalized version of Joel's actions -- We'll presume that by rescuing Ellie, and by killing the surgeon, Joel has caused the end of the human race. Ellie's sacrifice would have otherwise saved us from extinction, but now we're all doomed, because of the actions of this terrible man.

Even given that scenario, I think it's still reductive to call Joel a villain. In the court of Absolute Morality, sure, he's a murderer. Murder is wrong. You can't argue with that, because it's in the Bible, brah.

But "absolute morality" is still subjective to the person who drew the line in the sand. Really, morality doesn't exist; every situation is relative to the landscape which surrounds it. Joel has murdered people, but looking at the totality of his life, I don't know that I'd characterize him as a murderer. In a pre-cordyceps society, Joel would have lived his whole life without stabbing a single person. The idea that he would feel justified in killing another person would not even realistically cross his mind. So, inside, fundamentally, is he a murderer?

It was the circumstances of Joel's life that led him to the decisions he made. He watched his entire society collapse, and saw first-hand how fragile the veneer of that society was. During its death throes, he watched that society flail out and pointlessly kill his only daughter. Even if that old society could be re-established, Joel would not want it back.

Whatever value he once saw in that old world, he doesn't see anymore.

Circumstance led Joel down an alternate path, and he traveled so far down that path that he may have signed a death warrant for his whole species. But it's interesting to consider that the guy responsible for the end of the human race is not especially evil. Really, he's not evil at all. He's just a person. Any one of us, when put in the right situation, could have taken Joel's place. The Evil Destroyer Of All People is, ultimately, just a normal guy.

"Justified In Their Own Mind"

An oft-repeated trope is that "every good villain is justified in their own mind". It's a cliche which is often claimed, but is rarely true. Your standard "justified villain" is typically an unbelievable, inhuman prick. Being unable or unwilling to parse right from wrong is not the same as feeling that one's actions are justified.

The only way for a villain to feel truly justified is for them not to *be* a villain. The very notion of villainy is too cartoonish to be used as the basis for any realistic character. A "justified villain" is, ideally, just another protagonist, who is working toward a radically different purpose from the rest of their community. Living under a different moral code allows that character to do things the other characters would not.

It may sound like I'm splitting hairs, but I'm really worn out on the "justified in their own mind" trope. It's used to describe characters like The Joker, or James Bond villains -- Any villain, really. These characters are not justified in their own minds. They're fully aware that they're running roughshod across the world, and being massive dicks about it along the way.

This book is obviously biased, but I'm gonna go ahead and claim that The Last Of Us is one of the rare works which nails the idea of a justified villain, in Joel. During the pre-apocalypse, Joel was a man with little to no murder in his heart. A collapsing society drove him to become comfortable with murder, and without that mindset, he wouldn't have survived. Joel is basically the story of water finding its level.

Joel is not dedicated to good, or dedicated to evil. He behaves the way he feels he needs to in order to survive. Beneath his actions is not a cruel, Machiavellian sadist. Joel has his quirks and tendencies, the little facets of his personality that make him a unique and precious snowflake. But outside of massively extenuating circumstances -- Joel is just a guy.

Hyper-Misanthropy

The fact that I find Joel's behavior so easy to justify may be telling of my personality. The world pushed, and Joel pushed back. Seems fair to me.

But if you're not sold on the rationale behind Joel's actions, I think it helps to replay the opening section of the game. The opening of *The Last Of Us* was a fairly universally moving experience. But by the end of the game, a player is at least twelve hours removed from Sarah's death, and its emotional impact has dulled.

If one goes back to the beginning, watches Sarah die in Joel's arms, then transposes that feeling onto Joel at the end of the story... It makes his actions seem much clearer. Thinking of the sound that Sarah made right before she died, I can understand why Joel acted as he did. As cataclysmic as the repercussions may have been, he wasn't going to let another kid die for the benefit of some nebulous idea of society.

The price of saving Ellie may have been to deny humanity a tool required for its survival. But Joel didn't have much reason to be bothered about denying that salvation. When we watched the opening of *The Last Of Us*, we all teared up. We all felt a moment of revulsion toward society, and toward the people who form it. We may only have identified with that impulse for a moment, but we all felt it.

For us, it wasn't hard to shake off that feeling. But after spending twenty years among brutally harsh people, Joel wasn't able to forget. That feeling took root, and Joel's view of the human race changed. The Earth will keep spinning, with or without us. So why not without us? Is there really any reason for human beings to still be a part of this picture? In the larger view of things, how is our presence even valuable?

I'm just a normal guy, and I can see how a person's thoughts could get to that place. Anyone's mindset could shift in a direction that would allow them to do the kind of things that Joel did. Maybe Joel is history's greatest monster; maybe he's the man who put a bullet in the head of the human race... but he's still just a guy. I know I keep saying that, but I really find it pretty incredible. *The Last Of Us* shows that the key to a justified villain is to drop the idea that they are a villain.

Story Of The Year

One sunny day, I was lazing idly about, staring at the clouds. I was seeing if I could conjure up any recent games that really gave *The Last Of Us* a run for its money, in a storytelling capacity. There have been games with great characters, or great moments; even some great endings. But for overall presentation, from top to bottom... the clouds

revealed no answer. I thought I saw some clouds starting to spell out "Star Control II", but they pulled back. Those clouds knew they were reaching a little too far back for that pull.

So I went into my hyper-computerized bunker, where no ray of sun has ever nor shall ever fall. From my bank of Cray supercomputers, each one more cray than the last, I pulled up some Story Of The Year nominee lists. I spent a furrowed evening, butler by my side, browsing through the various contenders from the last few years. I waited in the hope that any of them could excite the tiny excitement hairs which coat my body.

These lists turned out to be not particularly inspiring. There are some fairly cohesive experiences happening in smaller games, but for big budget games, it's a sorry landscape. For storytelling which really sticks the landing, it's almost as though *The Last Of Us* didn't have any competition at all.

That opinion may sound harsh, but I'm talking about the best written games of the year, here. The *entire year*. The *best*. Not a good premise that doesn't pay off. Not a game that asks you to wade through a lot of clunkiness for a cool payoff at the end. Not a single great character swimming resiliently against a sea of dickheads. Definitely not your favorite spaceman being ludicrously-self-serious for hours on end. I'm talking actually, fully, totally good experiences. I'm talking writing that makes use of its medium, which integrates gameplay into its storytelling, and which blows your fucking shit apart while it's doing it.

Most years, the Story Of The Year award should be renamed the "Somebody's Gotta Win It" award. To be fair, I don't think movies and books are generally all that great, either. But other mediums would never give awards to some of the effluvia that gaming outlets give awards to. Whole years go by when no game's writing deserves an award at all.

Dick, dick, I'm a dick, I hate all the things... That's a song I wrote, sung to the tune of "Dick, dick, I'm a dick, I hate all the things".

But a couple of games did stand out to me: Portal! And Portal 2! I felt a bit surprised that I'd gotten this deep into a book about video games without having mentioned them. I could write a book about Portal, for sure. The Portal games are the only recent games from a major developer that I really feel fall into the same weight class as *The Last Of Us*. If I were Earth President, I would seal the Portal games in amber, and send them into space. If the aliens who found them didn't understand them, then that's on those aliens. We did the best we could with Portal. In the pantheon of Perfect Human Games, you've got Tetris, and you've got Portal. And maybe, uh, Jackal. Those are basically the perfect games.

Actually, scratch Jackal. I think I hit my head earlier. Also, my safe's empty, and my butler's gone. I'm not quite sure what's happened.

Now, back to criticizing other people's work: Besides Portal, none of the other Writing Of The Year titles really seemed worth making a fuss about. The PlayStation 3 era Uncharted games are close, and I do have a great respect for them. I love the moment-to-moment interactions between the characters, and love the performances. Uncharted broke a lot of ground for video game storytelling, which could not have been an easy task. Naughty Dog's accomplishment is especially evident by how the 2013 Tomb Raider game tried to use a similar storytelling style, and cataclysmically shit the bed. Then Tomb Raider stumbled next door and shit the neighbor's bed, and then went outside and shit some more. The way I hear it, Tomb Raider is still shitting to this day.

Uncharted 1-3 really do nail what they're trying to do. That being said, I don't feel like I could write a particularly compelling book about them. Uncharted is made up of a lot of great moments (the Lazarevic boss battle excepted). But at the end of the day, those moments don't seem to add up to much of a greater picture. They're great games, and Uncharted 2 in particular I have played many, many times. But I don't lay around, staring at the clouds, dreaming lazily about what it could all mean. I don't get those *Jackal* thoughts.

To find super-rad, exciting writing in video games, it helps to move into smaller spheres. Twine games, interactive fiction -- There's definitely some cool stuff happening in the underground. But a really well written game is still a rare find; it's not like there's a hidden cache of fringe games which are consistently knocking everyone's socks off. Photopia came out in 2000, for christ's sake. From mainstream blockbusters, to the most finely crafted indie-wunderkinds, nobody's bringing an experience to the table that The Last Of Us can't hold its own against.

The Last Of Us is one of the first times when the presentation of a game's narrative is of a high enough standard to stand as a great work. Not "good for a video game", but good, period. Show me a great movie, show me a great book, and I think The Last Of Us can stand next to them.

At the same time, The Last Of Us doesn't ignore its roots as a video game. The Last Of Us is about gameplay, about item collection, about resource management. Its systems are sometimes openly fudged, "game-ified": Scavenged ammo is impossibly scarce, and combat can be easily reset into pseudo-stealth with just a moment of hiding. And of course, Joel kills far, far more people than is necessary to characterize him as a killy gentleman.

But by acknowledging that we are in fact playing a game, and by treating those game-

play elements more metaphorically than literally, the gameplay is then able to help support the narrative. *The Last Of Us* does not represent what surviving in the apocalypse would really be like. But *The Last Of Us* *feels* the way an apocalypse would feel. When you kill an armed man, there's no reason for him not to be carrying bullets. But that feeling of desperation and scarcity is a more valuable storytelling tool than realism would be.

On top of all this, *The Last Of Us* is somehow also a fun game. My first playthrough was fairly harrowing, but once the systems were better understood, *The Last Of Us* became something I enjoyed re-playing. And that, arguably, is still the oldest and most important aspect of a video game.

Goddamn, man. Jackal really does do it all. *The Last Of Us*, I mean. I meant to write "*The Last Of Us*". Is this my blood? God, I'm dizzy.

"Good For A Video Game"

"Good For A Video Game" is one of those phrases I'm getting real tired of. Like "Justified Villain", or "Good Star Wars Movie". The jig is up, so it's time to stop jigging.

If you're the type who claims that a video game story is "good for a video game", then you're part of the problem, son! Evil only exists because *good men* refuse to stand up, and say "NO MORE!" We could be doing the backstroke in martian swimming pools filled with pure mercury, our hyper-alloyed skin glistening with superpowers, coated in the caramel dream of a newborn tomorrow... but we ain't. And you know why? Because you didn't stand up! Because you didn't demand more! You laid on your commie back and said, "Eh... you know. It was pretty good. For a video game."

"Good for a video game" is just a slower way of saying "piece of shit". Your grandpappy knew it. Your mama knew it. Why you pretend not to know it, I cannot fathom. You're no son of mine, and no son to this great country.

Bastion

Toward the end of writing this book, I finally played *Bastion*, from Supergiant Games. After writing so many rambly rants about video game storytelling, it does a body good to play a game that knocks it so cleanly out of the park. *Bastion* is pretty sick.

The gameplay in *Bastion* isn't my super favorite; it's a bit cluster-fucky for my tastes. But it's still pretty fun, and that small comment is literally my only criticism. Holy shit,

does that game nail its presentation and storytelling. It's like, fuck, dude. Dude. Fuck.

Art style, overall tone, subject matter, writing, narration, music... it's all just really, really good. When that duet kicks in during the end credits, I had chills. I highly recommend Bastion. I think I got it during a Steam sale for like three bucks. That's borderline criminal. Bastion is some good stuff.

Infection

Okay! Coming in for a landing! Gonna wrap up this book, for really real! I don't know why I keep apologizing for these divergences. Diverging has clearly become what this book is about. All this apologizing must be because of my Canadian upbringing. I'm inherently, inerrantly polite. Sorta.

While writing a section about my hopes and dreams for Ellie's future, I got derailed by thoughts of Ellie's cordyceps infection. Can Ellie infect others? That would severely hurt her ability to cohabit within Tommy's community, or any community.

As we know, cordyceps is an actual affliction of the insect. It's cool that The Last Of Us's pandemic is tied in to a real phenomenon. But the human cordyceps infection is clearly designed around storytelling requirements, more than on science. The idea that cordyceps could spread to humans, or that it would have a Clicker-style effect on a human host, does not seem particularly rooted in realness.

I didn't spend too much time digging through the hard science, as it just lead to me struggling pathetically to understand the nuance and implications of a lotta fancy Wikipedia pages. But whatever I found wouldn't really matter anyway; this is a fantasy sickness, with fantasy properties. So instead, I decided to look toward the game's narrative for cues as to how Ellie's infection should be interpreted.

The scanners used by the Boston military clearly identified Ellie as being infected. After being bit, something in her physiology became permanently altered. Later, Ellie told David that she infected him. But as far as we know, she hadn't infected anyone previously. I suspect she said that just to rattle ol' Dave. David's lack of concern about being caught in a burning building could suggest that an infection was taking hold of his brain. But David might not need an infection in order to act like a lunatic.

Marlene, Joel and Tess all spend time in close proximity to Ellie, but none take any special precautions while being near her. The notion that they could be in danger is never broached, even in passing. That, to me, is a big storytelling signal that we are not meant to consider Ellie as medically dangerous. It's a tip-off from the Story-Gods, that

while Ellie does carry some form of the virus, it's an inert form.

I definitely prefer to think that Ellie is non-infectious. Thinking of her as an eternal germ-bomb is just depressing. Normally, the human-cordyceps infection seems to transfer very easily. If Ellie were contagious, there'd be no fun sock hops in her future. Communal blood letting rituals, so important for bonding within a community -- Forget it. A swift kick out of town is really the best she could hope for. Safe-Ellie is definitely the assumption I fall toward.

But I was near a Starbucks with sweet, sweet wifi, so I decided to do a little Last Of Us specific internet research. Let's see if anyone came up with a more conclusive theory about Ellie's infection.

I found one kid who said he hoped that Ellie was infectious, because that would be "cool". He maintained that it would be as though Ellie had a super power. After all, shouldn't she get something out of all the difficult shit she'd had to go through? A deadly germ power, perhaps?

I gotta say, that idea surprised me. That view of super powers is why I never liked superhero comics, even as a kid. Having the ability to perform wanton destruction is not a *power*. It's a huge detriment. A lot of superheroes could kick ass on a battlefield, but day to day, their powers have no practical use. Isolation and pariahism are really all that these powers are gonna bestow.

Ellie spreading infection would definitely fall into that category. She could bite someone, wait a few hours, and then have a crazed killer who is now bent on destroying her. Even in the apocalypse, nobody's gonna sign up for that. Teens on the internet, man -- Great for wacky, violent theories, but not great at considering the larger picture.

While I'm on the topic, superhero comics really are dumb. "Hey, I can emit a sonic blast from my mouth! What a horrifying development! I know, I'll put on a fucking skin-tight suit! Look, all my friends came to a similar conclusion, as well as all my enemies! Everything about my life is a crazed nightmare!" Comics nerds are so far gone, they can't even do power-fantasies right. I judge you, nerds! Judgment! But I'm sure you're used to it.

I did find one Ellie-theory that I liked: Real-life cordyceps is a fungus, but in The Last Of Us, it's treated more like a virus. There are viruses, such as influenza or chickenpox, where a person isn't likely to get the same strain twice. They carry signs of the virus, such as scars, or antibodies created by the initial infection. But they're not infectious themselves.

Ellie's infection could work similarly -- She has a clear cordyceps scar on her arm, and the scanners show her as having been infected. But the infection was minor, and once that initial infection passed, maybe it can no longer be passed on. I like the idea that Ellie functions in the same way.

Scientifically, who knows? I'm no science guy. But that works for me. If there's an even semi-plausible way for Ellie to be non-infectious, I'll take it. In my book, which is this book, Ellie is fine and dandy like a man named Randy.

That being said, when people see Ellie's cordyceps scar, they may freak out and call her a witch. People are fearful, and generally kinda dumb. Ain't nothin' we can do about that. For that eventuality, I guess we'll just have to keep our fingers crossed. Good luck, Ellie!

I also hope that you don't have an infected demon-baby. Truly, I do.

Ellie

A lotta bad stuff has happened in Ellie's life. After these hundreds of pages, that's the scintillating conclusion I've come to. No need to thank me.

But despite the toil and uncertainty of her life, I like to think that Ellie will be able to move on. I don't think she's gonna become an apocalypse-era real-estate tycoon, her pockets bulging with apoca-bucks. But emotionally speaking, I think she'll do a lot better than our old friend Joel.

Joel became trapped by his past; the loss of his daughter covered him in spiderwebs of despair, and the crumbling of his society blanketed him in mummy-wrappings of madness. He was caught in a mire from whence he could nary escape. Past catastrophes caused tragic future eventualities to manifest in an inevitable confluence of calamitous crap. Basically, he murdered everyone who looked at him cock-eyed. But that's what an apocalypse will do to you -- It makes you tough, or it makes you dead.

Ellie and Joel have experienced different kinds of loss, and it seems a little strange to try to gauge their relative levels of tragedy. But, let's. Joel lost Sara, but Ellie lost Riley. Joel presumably got to experience having parents, which Ellie did not. Joel's society turned on him, while Ellie's society never really had time for her in the first place.

In the pain-olympics, a winning argument could be made for either contestant. But even if Ellie had lost the exact same things as Joel, I think Ellie would weather that storm more successfully. Ellie appears to be the intrinsically stronger person. Ellie's internal wounds seem to heal, while Joel's only calcify. Ellie can roll with the apocalypse-punches; she can lose the person who was closest to her, and still find a way to maintain a relatively positive attitude about life. Joel, on the other hand, takes his misfortune as an excuse to kill anyone he sees fit.

Invincible Children

I'm not sure where I first heard about the idea of "invincible children". I think it was in a book by Nathaniel Branden, a psychotherapist who specialized in self-esteem.

An "invincible child" is basically a kid who knows that the bad parts of their life were not their fault. They have an intrinsic sense that the world is not within their control, and that they're not to blame for the things that may have gone wrong. No matter what happens, they have a relatively easy time moving on with their life. There's no clear reason why. It's just the way they are.

Ellie seems to be one of those people. It sounds nice, right? I'm definitely not that way. Being a little more Ellie-like could not hurt in the slightest. You wanna talk about super powers? *That's* a super power. Take your Fists Of World Cracking, and trade those bad boys in for a natural sense of well-being. *That's* a useful ability. Being able to navigate day-to-day experiences without an inappropriate sense of stress -- That's a power fantasy I can get behind.

As far as an apocalypse scenario goes, emotional stability is about the best power around. Hunting, fighting, scavenging, those are all useful. But not wanting to kill yourself every moment of every day -- You really can't put a price on that. That tops the list, for sure.

Mechanics vs Storytelling

On a first playthrough, it can be difficult to appraise storytelling in a video game. Story in games can't be shaped as easily as it can in other mediums -- It's fair to presume that a design decision has been made to fulfill mechanical requirements, rather than as a distinct thematic choice.

So I didn't initially think overmuch about Ellie's resilient personality, or its meaning as a storytelling choice. I've internalized a lot of unflappable video game characters over the years, and I presumed that Ellie's strong personality was a similar gameplay contrivance. Video games have always required brave characters: When a button gets pushed, an action needs to be performed, or the game won't function. I'm telling you that in case you didn't know, because maybe you've never played a game before. Welcome. But lemme tell you also that games which break from that tradition are not remembered with particular fondness. "I am particularly fond of Lester The Unlikely." I put that in quotation marks, but that's not a quote anyone has ever said.

Before considering the thematic meaning of any aspect of a video game, the first question is always, "Was this decision made merely as a requirement of development?" With *The Last Of Us*, I did come to recognize that Ellie's resilient personality was a deliberate storytelling choice, rather than a mechanical conceit. But it took awhile for my thoughts to move in that direction. Game designers are not necessarily free to tell any kind of story they want -- They construct a piece of clockwork, and then can only tell a story within the confines of that apparatus.

I feel myself being pulled toward a divergence... it's like a whirlpool, and it's drawing me in! I'm fighting against the current, but it's no use! We're being pulled under!

Brothers

As I mentioned, I don't often give video game storytelling much benefit of the doubt. I tend to presume that gameplay quirks are merely due to wrinkles in development, rather than being distinct design choices. But I love when that assumption is proven wrong. A great example comes from *Brothers: A Tale Of Two Sons*, which is a really great game. It's a much better story about brothers than, say, *Uncharted 4*.

Toward the end of *Brothers*, the bros are joined by a new female companion. As they travel together, Older Brother has to climb carefully across a wide gap. Meanwhile, the new companion simply leaps across, in a display of physics unlike anything we've seen previously.

Brothers is a really well made game, and every moment seems carefully considered. I had no reason to assume that this new companion would be implemented any differently. But when I saw her make that bizarrely huge jump, I didn't think about it from a storytelling perspective. My initial thought was, "They must not have wanted to animate her climbing across. Or, maybe they just ran out of development time. That's weird, but it's no biggie. These things happen."

Brothers players know that the girl turns out to be a horrifying spider-creature. Her giant leap is one of several clues that something is off about her, not the least of which being that when we meet her, a mob of people is actively trying to kill her.

Yet despite the storytelling care *Brothers* had shown at every point, my cynical head still chalked up the spider-girl's odd behavior as a mere development problem. I was pleased as punch when she sprouted spider legs, and started royally fucking up our shit. The cynical scales fell from my eyes, and lo, I was healed. Games have a lot of unique storytelling tools at their disposal, and it feels really great when they're exercised so well.

Cheers to you, *Brothers*! Sorry for spoiling the spider thing, but this is a great example of how spoilers really aren't important. I had heard about the ending of that game well before I played it, and I still had an amazing experience. Had I not heard discussions about *Brothers*, I wouldn't have played it at all. So if a spoiler leads you to play a great game that you would have otherwise missed, then it was well worth being spoiled.

Revel in the spoilers, my friends! We're in the midst of a media flood -- If you try to swallow everything that comes your way, you're gonna drown. Let the spoilers help guide you, toward the beautiful islands of excellence, where you can laze about, sunning yourself and eating coconuts to your heart's delight. Sounds pretty good, eh? Ah, spoilers.

Bio: Inf

The reverse phenomenon happened in the early days of the release of Bioshock: Infinite. The original Bioshock games were very carefully constructed, and were at the forefront of the modern wave of gameplay/storytelling synthesis. The more time one spent examining and considering those games' environments, the more intricately connected one felt to those stories.

That high level of pedigree led people to expect a similar level of craftsmanship from Bioshock: Infinite. Many aspects of Infinite seemed, on the surface, to be haphazardly designed. But those elements were given every benefit of the doubt, the assumption being that each aspect had a greater meaning, which would eventually be revealed.

From not being able to see Booker's reflection, to the automaton-like behavior of the citizens and law enforcement of Columbia -- Players questioned what each design decision might mean. What hints were we meant to glean from these storytelling choices? What would be their ultimate significance?

Turns out, there was no significance. Turns out, those and many other elements of Bioshock: Infinite were pure corning-cutting. Turns out, Bioshock: Infinite was kind of a piece of crap. It was a haphazard assemblage of whatever semi-random elements the developers could feasibly mash together. The storytelling and gameplay not only failed to intertwine, but were in active opposition throughout.

That was certainly an unexpected twist, but not the twist the Bioshock faithful were expecting. The original games had taught us to dive deep, and rewarded us for examining every detail. Infinite reminded us not to look too closely at a video game, because game development is a tough racket. Most of the time, looking under the hood just reveals a huge goddamn mess.

I wish I had my own version of the show Noclip, but which focused on games that went wrong. I don't know who would volunteer to be interviewed for such a series, but I really love that stuff. There's nothing more fascinating than a once-noble series, which just falls off a fucking cliff. Sometimes, that failure will lead to an entire team being dissolved. But other times, it will cause the series to sell more copies than ever before. Game development is like the wild west; there truly is no justice.

We've made it through the divergences! We've surfaced! Breathe in that beautiful air... Wow, this book really is almost over. I can see the end from here. How crazy is that? But we won't get there with wishes and prayers! We'll only get there through hard work! The hard work of *reading!* Let's go, gang!

Narrative Intent

As I got deeper into *The Last Of Us*, it became clear that Ellie's strong personality was not a story or gameplay convenience. Characters in *The Last Of Us* may be assignable to archetypal groups, but their characterization within that group is very deliberate. Characters aren't tailored to gameplay; rather, the gameplay is designed to help reinforce the traits of the characters.

It would have been understandable if Ellie behaved in a more frail manner. I can imagine a version of the story where she is constantly stressed, nervous and bird-like, unwilling to speak up. When groups of people constantly attack you on sight, a victimized attitude would seem appropriate. Ellie's only reprieve from her fellow man is when she meets a group of monsters, who also attack her on sight. It's a pretty rough gig.

But the game makes a deliberate point of pointing out Ellie's resiliency. Henry specifically comments, "She doesn't seem bothered by all this." A little later, Sam asks Ellie, "How is it that you're never scared?" Those are unusual things for a game's narrative to point out. No one asks Mayor Mike Haggard why he's not scared of his town being overrun by tweaked-out murderers. He's already shirtless and carrying a crowbar -- The situation has moved beyond the need to inquire.

From a gameplay perspective, a more timid version of Ellie may even have been easier to implement. A frightened Ellie could cower in the corner of combat arenas; enemies could still be programmed to ignore her, but that concession would seem less evident if Ellie weren't directly involved in each scrimmage. Naughty Dog took on additional design burdens in order to present Ellie in a more brave light, which was definitely important to the story. A less-strong version of Ellie would have led to a very different outcome.

Motive Power

If Ellie were a softer character, *The Last Of Us* would have had a very different ending. At the most basic level, I don't think Ellie and Joel would have survived. Joel could conceivably have gotten Ellie through most combat situations, but a timid Ellie would have watched Joel drown in Pittsburgh. If not then, Ellie likely would have starved in the winter. She may even have left Joel behind, impaled on a piece of rebar.

Beyond those obvious choke points, Ellie's strength is a hugely important part of the story overall. Ellie is a brave fucking kid, and that's really what her story is about. Before being bitten, Ellie had never been outside of Boston. Her life shifted rapidly from being with Riley, who she trusted, to being with Marlene, who she kinda trusted, to

being with some smugglers, who she didn't trust at all.

After that immense shake-up, Ellie found herself tasked with heading out into the terrifying beyond, on a mission that was arguably the most important any person had ever undertaken. Her success or failure could make-or-break the entire human race. Whether that was literally true, she believed it to be true, and it was her mission to carry far more than it was Joel's. Joel was a facilitator, but Ellie was the motive power. The most important factor in that mission's success was in Ellie simply not letting the pressure of the situation shut her down.

In the end, Ellie's quest did not lead to a vaccine, through no fault of her own. That end result doesn't change the fact that in order to make a cure potentially possible, and in order to do what she saw as right, Ellie had to face up to and overcome enormously hostile odds. The only character with a comparable level of resolve may have been Tommy, and it took him a long time to get there. Everyone else seemed to be on a much less noble path.

In most analysis of *The Last Of Us*, including this one, Ellie's part is overshadowed by discussion of Joel. But ultimately, Joel was a man who already felt like he had nothing to lose. We found him in Boston in what was essentially a death-spiral, and he just kept on spiraling.

Almost everyone Ellie met was mentally checked out, in one way or another. They were living out their lives like they were on borrowed time. We saw sparks of reconstruction from people like Marlene and David. But those characters were only able to hold on to hope for the future through worldviews which were fueled by desperation and mania.

Ellie isn't that way. Ellie isn't pining for an old world, and isn't desperate to escape this one. Her lack of experience with the pre-apocalypse may be to her benefit. The world around her is the only world she's known; she doesn't demonstrate the crippling of spirit and sense of loss that most of the adult characters do. Ellie's personality has a stable quality. Where everyone else is trying to make the best of a bad situation, Ellie seems, at some fundamental level, to accept the world she's in. Her immunity is what causes the story to initially cast a light on her. But once that light is cast, Ellie demonstrates an attitude of calm perseverance that stands in strong contrast to the other characters.

Transposing

I don't think the story of *The Last Of Us* is trying to convey any message directly. But I do think the example of Ellie's perseverance can be transposed onto the lower-stakes environment of modern life. Her story is an example of how, in order to make it, in order

to have the kind of life that you wanna have, you've gotta be brave.

Nothing that you really wanna do in life is gonna sound good to other people. It may not even sound possible. But to find the limits of what you're able to accomplish, you've gotta venture out into the wild beyond, with yourself as the primary motive power. No matter how crazy your goal, or how scary it is, you've gotta press on. To get the most out of life, you've gotta muster up some Ellie-levels of courage. If it's you versus the world, then so be it.

It may help to vocalize that idea. If you're pursuing your life goals, but you feel your resolve starting to crumble, stop whatever you're doing. Hold your hands to the skies, and take a deep breath. Then shout: "I AM BRAVE LIKE ELLIE! I AM! ELLIE!!! BRAVE!!! RRRRAAAAAAHHHHH!!! ELLIE!!! BRAVE!!! ELLIE!!! BRAVE!!! AAAAOOOOOAAAAWWWW!!!!"

However, if your goal is to be cool, or to be viewed with respect by the people standing immediately around you, then don't do that.

Ellie The Daughter

For me, Ellie's brave status removes some of the ambiguity from the end of the story. One interpretation of The Last Of Us is that Ellie believes in Joel's final lie-bomb: She's a trusting young girl, and so buys in to the things that her surrogate dad has told her, no matter how patchy his story.

I like that The Last Of Us is so open to interpretation, but that opinion of Ellie always struck me as odd. A frail, bird-like Ellie might have been trusting in that way; she might have passively accepted what Joel had told her, and used her willpower to wall off further inquiry. That type of Ellie would likely also have stopped swearing, as soon as one of her teachers expressed disapproval. That's the Ellie who wouldn't have made it to the Fireflies in the first place. That is demonstrably not the Ellie we see in this game.

It's great that Ellie and Joel spent a year together -- Some good times, some bad times, a few laughs, a few tears. But change and instability have been the fabric of Ellie's life. If Joel is not able to trust Ellie with the truth, then there's no way she can trust him.

As I've written, I understand Joel's actions -- I don't even think that lying was necessarily the wrong thing to do, under the circumstances. But I also see how Ellie can't allow herself to remain entwined in such an unbalanced situation. She's not looking for a wagon to hitch onto. She's looking for a situation where she will be viewed as an equal.

Joel sees it as his place to make decisions for Ellie, because she's young and can be taken advantage of. Granted, her circumstances were extreme -- If not for Joel's intervention, Ellie would be dead. But if not for Joel's intervention, there might be a cordyceps vaccine. So, swings and roundabouts on that one.

Maybe Joel hindered Ellie's quest, and maybe he helped her. The situation with the Fireflies was crazy. But, it's in the past. It can't be changed. What's most important now is the future. Ellie can't allow herself to be caught in a situation where she is expected to repress who she is, or to be less than she is. The power of who she is is what keeps her moving, and keeps her motivated. Being herself is how she succeeds in a world which is aimed squarely against her.

Despite what Joel wants, or what he thinks he needs -- Despite whatever choices he made, or the reasons why he made them -- Ellie is not going to demure to what someone else wants. She's not looking to be anyone's sidekick, or anyone's life accessory. She's her own person. I'm sure she's disappointed that she might have to separate from her friend. But the story of surrogate parenthood is Joel's story. Ellie was never looking to be anyone's daughter.

Box Art

I really love how Ellie is placed in the center of the *Last Of Us* box art. Joel takes up support placement, and I heard that the marketing department was not a fan of that decision. But Naughty Dog insisted.

Naughty Dog rebelling against the bullshit of standard-marketing conventions is great; it helps offset the enormous male-bias of modern gaming, and gives Ellie her fair placement as the main character that she is. Their choice may only be a single drop, in a bucket that's a long way from being filled. But the issue gained a lot of visibility when *The Last Of Us* became the most overwhelmingly praised game of recent times.

It's also a great example of a developer simply saying "Fuck you, I won't do what you tell me." That can not be said for the overwhelming majority of marketing-obsessed, research-driven, big-budget game production. Most games feature bog-standard box art, with a tough looking man, staring grimly into the middle-distance. Some even go so far as to apologize for their art, giving a rationale that essentially boils down to, "Sorry, but we had no choice. We need to make sure that douchebags will buy this game."

There's a contemporary example which did just that, and I'm sure you can guess which game I'm referring to. In case you still haven't picked up on who my de facto whipping-boy is, it starts with a "Bioshock", and ends with an "Infinite". It's Bioshock: Infinite.

Bioshock: Infinite did that.

Beyond its meaning in gaming culture at large, I think Ellie's placement on the game's cover is important in another way. It's appropriate because Ellie is the only hero in this story.

Heroism

As we discussed earlier in this monstrous tome, evidence of Joel's severity is layered throughout The Last Of Us. But it's still surprising, at the end of the story, when Joel jumps tracks into mega-violence. At best, he falls into a moral grey area, and that's being kind.

Tommy would probably rank near the top for relative Good-Guy status; his town is a pretty swell achievement, and he talks a good game about his vision for the future. As things stand, Tommy seems relatively cool.

But during those years of being a Hunter with Joel, I'm sure Tommy didn't sit back and fretfully twiddle his fingers. He said that he still has nightmares about those days, and told Joel that the things they did to survive weren't worth it. He would rather have died than to have done the things he did. Tommy was a bad dude, probably as bad as they come, and was probably that way for years.

It's the same for all the characters, and that moral greyness brings me back to how appropriate it is for Ellie to be the main character featured in the game's artwork: If there's any hero to be found in this story, it's Ellie. Like everyone else, she is a murderer. But unlike everyone else, she killed almost entirely in self-defense. And she lives in a truly not-nice world. The nice world ended about six years before she was born.

In the Hierarchy Of Goodness, Ellie comes out on top. She was pretty much the only person trying to do the right thing, for no other reason than that it was the right thing to do. Tommy went through a real bad patch before he regained some righteousness; the Fireflies may have started out relatively well-meaning, but years of struggle and bureaucratic mutation changed their organization into one which is fully willing to commit violence against the innocent.

It could be that all of the characters in The Last Of Us started out relatively good, and eventually became twisted by the world around them. In the old world, maybe Bill ran an orphanage for puppies; perhaps only after the fall of society did he find himself living in the center of a survivalist spider-web, with designs to explode anyone who came too near him. Maybe everyone in this world will eventually reach the point where other

people stop seeming like individual beings, and start seeming like fair targets for murder. Perhaps each character's corruption is just a matter of time.

In fact, once one domino tumbles, the rest seem to come down pretty quickly. Ellie's stint with a sniper rifle came directly after her first time shooting a man. She went from never having killed a person, to pro-actively attacking people who were dangerous to her, within that same lazy afternoon. It could be that Ellie's youth is all that has kept her from tumbling further down the assassin-path; given a little time, maybe she'll end up just as bad as everyone else.

But what this book presupposes is... maybe she won't?

I guess I don't need to keep belaboring this point. Everyone's bad, everyone's a killer, it's the apocalypse, rah rah. But given those parameters, Ellie is cool shit. She's certainly the coolest shit to be found in these parts. Henry and Sam seemed like they might be okay, but we never really got to see what their overall lives were like. And they're *dead*, so we can never find out. Okay? They're *dead*, and nothing's gonna bring them back. Stop talking about it! You're upsetting your grandmother! Why do you even come to Thanksgiving, if all you're gonna do is get in fights about Henry and Sam? You know Gran-Gran doesn't like them. They left Joel to die! Good people, my foot! They were turn-coats! Get out of this house! Get out, and don't come back until you think about what you've done! Oh good, now Gran-Gran is throwing up cranberry sauce all over the table. Yes, it is your fault! You shook her up! Emotionally! Get steppin', before Pappy gives you a shiner you won't soon forget! How you came from these sainted loins, I will never know... Yes, they are sainted! The Pope himself personally anointed... This is not the time! Nor the issue! Now get out! GET OUT!

...I'm very sorry you had to see that. But we will not speak about Henry and Sam at this table. We are going to have a nice meal.

So Ellie's not perfect, but I'd comfortably include her in the grand tradition of anti-heroes, at the very least. A noble killer. Failing that, maybe she's just a kid trying to help the world, and trying not to die in the process. If that means a few bullets in a few heads, and a few stabbings in a few kidneys, then that's how it's gotta be. In my experience, it's tough to find a stabbing victim who wasn't in some way angling for a stabbing, particularly in a video game. Water finds its level, and the kidneys of asshole raiders find the blades of heroes. That's literally as clearly as I can put that.

This segment kinda got away from me. But in conclusion, Ellie counts as a hero in my book. If you think differently, then let's see your book, sausage. All it takes is a word processor and a couple years of toil. Hell, you could scribble your book out on napkins, and take photos of said napkins. It could be like a found-art project. That's actually a

pretty cool idea. I say go for it. House Of Napkins, you could call it. "Utterly Unfilmable", say the critics.

"A mediation on coffee shops and their place in the modern creative process," says the Fancy Rat blog.

"Fuckin' rad like a rad bad dad," says New York Hip Ship, the offshore, boat-based indie newspaper.

I swear to god, this book is almost over. It's so, so close. Stay strong.

Idealism

The story of The Last Of Us makes use of many common tropes. It contains a lot of ideas that we've seen before, in zombie fiction, in apocalypse fiction, and in video game fiction. But The Last Of Us pays off in ways that aren't common to its contemporaries.

Its ending in particular is unusual. For one thing, The Last Of Us doesn't contain a Tear Jerker Death Finale. Since the days of Dick and Dock, nobly turning themselves to stone in Final Fantasy II, video game writers have gloried in the drama of character death.

Technical Note: Research reveals that the two characters were actually named "Palom" and "Porom". I presume this was a localization error.

Final Fantasy II/IV was the first time I remember character death being used as a major plot point. Since then the trope has exploded, and has become heavily weighted toward a game's finale. The dramatic beat of The Sad, Sad Death is nearing critical mass; it's become the video-game equivalent of Oscar-bait, and is used so often that I absolutely, *absolutely* did not expect both Joel and Ellie to make it through The Last Of Us alive. If you want players to feel emotionally affected by your game's narrative, then you kill a character, and you kill 'em good. It's practically a checkbox on the back of the game: We guarantee that your favorite will die! The story might not make much sense along the way, but man, you're gonna cry at the end!

To be fair, it usually works. The death of a main character can often choke me up. It's hard not to feel bad when a character you've spent a lot of time with dies. But as that card continues to be played, it's starting to take on the feeling of a parlour trick. It can be very affecting in the moment; but afterward, when examining the totality of a story, it can seem like death was the only point. A character death can be a fast-track to emotional resonance, but often without having much underlying meaning.

Death is not on the docket for *The Last Of Us* -- Not the death of the leads, anyway. There are many secondary characters who don't survive, because the idea of a happy ending, or of a narrative victory, is also far from anything that *The Last Of Us* is trying to accomplish.

The Last Of Us doesn't necessarily focus on a single overriding point. There may not be an individual, clear idea upon which to hang one's scholarly hat. Such a hat would, I presume, have a full brim, and perhaps some manner of stovepipe-type conveyance. I admit, I'm no expert on hats, and I'm immediately wishing that I hadn't gone down this path of thought. As I approach the end of this book, it feels like staring into a Lovecraftian abyss, rendering linear thought near-impossible. The completion of this work feels like an achievement too shambling and horrible to be serviced by mere description. Hence, the sebaceous formation of these ill-conceived asides, about hats and other subjects. Perhaps the madness inherent in human endeavor is overtaking this project, its husky voration leaving no time for meditation upon its true nature, before its target is immobilized and torn asunder.

Idealism, Take Two

The situation at the end of *The Last Of Us* isn't the cheeriest. But I do think things will be okay for Ellie. She didn't save the world, but none of us are gonna save the world. If I may speak on a haughty topic, in the manner of a douchebag:

When we come of age, we conjure up a lotta big ideas. I certainly did; when I was seventeen, all the problems of the world seemed pretty clear to me. Given some time and some elbow grease, I didn't see why I couldn't re-fashion the human condition into a new and more wise form. You think I'm a dickbag now, you shoulda met me back then. Fun time had by ALL.

Most idealistic people are this way: We see the problems of the world, and we come up with designs on how to fix them. But teenage idealism proves unrealistic; we grow older, and our world-spanning plans are revealed to be completely unattainable. We may even realize that if we *did* somehow change the world, it would probably be for the worse.

So life becomes about smaller goals, and about learning how to solve the puzzle of living out our own specific lives. For most of us, that process doesn't happen as literally as it did for Ellie. Ellie is basically going through a giant-sized coming of age: The big idea, the Big Plan To Fix It All, did not work out. So all that's left now is to re-calibrate. The Big Change did not happen. So the new plan is to manage her own life, and to try to improve things in whatever small ways are actually attainable. The new plan is to just

keep on living.

"The hardest thing in this world is to live in it," Gandhi once said. Or possibly Buffy. I'll be honest, I get my vampire slayers easily mixed up. Maybe it was Noam Chomsky. Nobody fucks with Noam. When Noam talks, people fucking listen. And vampires fucking *run*. Run n' Gun Chomsky, is what the schoolchildren call him. Over fifty confirmed kills, and who knows how many more under the cover of night. I could go on, but as a kindness, I shall not.

Focus, Keith. Focus. You're almost there.

The Future

Ellie will obviously have huge doubts about what happened while she was at the Firefly hospital. If she learns the truth, she might wonder if her death really would have meant a vaccine. But until Joel decides to fess up, that whole event can only be a guess to her.

Whatever Ellie learns in the future, and whichever vaccine theory she leans toward, I think she'll be able to internalize the fact that what happened wasn't her fault. She did everything she could. The only happy ending in *The Last Of Us* may simply be in finding a character who is gonna carry on, relatively untouched by the situation around her. An invincible child, someone who won't allow her life to become ensnared by the past.

Joel is locked in a mindset of survivalist brutality, a broken watch on his wrist shackling him to the memories of a life that he can never return to.

Bill is alone in his town, unwilling to trust another living soul.

The Pittsburgh Hunters have cannibalized any sense of normal society, eschewing women and children, locked in a tailspin that can only end in ruin.

David's group are cannibals in a literal sense, so desperate for leadership that they'll follow whatever policies a charismatic maniac puts before them.

If anyone deserves a stronger future, and deserves to live in a society like the one Tommy has built, it's Ellie. And despite all the terrible things that happened along the way, Ellie did get there. It may not sound like much, but really, things could be a lot worse. And as one gets older, it becomes clear that "things could be worse" actually means that things are going pretty good.

The Last Of Us

The phrase "The Last Of Us" comes from a headline, from the front page of one of the final newspapers to be printed. I'm not sure if the newspaper itself can be found in the game, but it's featured in the Last Of Us art book.

A little while after the game's release, I heard the theory that "The Last Of Us" refers to the literal end of humankind. It isn't just a cool title; the insinuation is that by curtailing a vaccine, it's only a matter of time before the human race dies out.

That theory is pretty fucking metal. The idea that we've been controlling the catalyst for the destruction of humankind, and to learn that that catalyst is just a normal guy... That's metal as *fuck*. That's a skeleton with two guns in its mouth level of metal.

But that idea could never fully take root in my mind. Ultimately, I was not swayed by the metal. In the fiction presented, I don't think the human race is over. I think the human race will be alright. "The Last Of Us", to me, is just a dramatic headline.

It's a spooky idea, the thought that this is a telling of humanity's final days. But as the old adage goes, you have to look at what's shown, and not at what's told. When a story feeds me an idea, it's like when a teacher or a boss feeds me an idea -- I tend not to accept what they say at face value. People are full of shit, and writers are doubly full of shit. It's more important to examine the situation, and to try to bypass the editorial slant of the teller.

In the reality presented by The Last Of Us, the human race is not actually in all that bad a position. Not from an extinction standpoint, at least. Things are bad, maybe about as bad as they can get... But even that's not true. An ice age would be worse. A meteor striking the Earth would be worse. I don't see any great reason why this pandemic has to be the end of us.

The situation in The Last Of Us is similar to the situation in the George Romero zombie films -- Society has fallen, and a lotta people have died. But the real problem is that we can't stop hitting each other over the head with lead pipes. If people could just get their shit together, humankind could easily rise again. The cordyceps infection didn't manage to destroy us in those first years, and we are now twenty years deep. If we can survive for twenty years, then fuck, man: We can last forever.

Now, I'm just a small-town fictional-disease biologist. But it seems to me that the initial cordyceps infection was as bad as it was because the world contained so many potential hosts. The majority of those hosts are now infected, or dead. Eventually, the infected bodies will run out of gas, and rot away. It probably should have happened already; the

law of conservation of energy does not allow for the Infected to romp about for years on end, hoping to stumble upon prey. That same fictional liberty is often taken in zombie movies: Realistically, even if you're a monster, you either consume frequently, or you stop walking around.

Twenty years deep, and without an abundance of available hosts, the spread of cordyceps will have lessened considerably. Even during Joel and Ellie's quest, the patches of Infected seemed to be relatively few and far between. An organized militia shouldn't have much trouble clearing out the remaining pockets of evil fungus.

Bloaters would be harder to deal with, what with their spore bombs, armored plating, and violent attitudes. But, come on; there are no Bloaters. I know it's weird to draw a line within a fictional scenario, but Bloaters are some video game shit. Even if human cordyceps were somehow a real disease, there would be no Bloaters. It's said on the streets, as it's said in academia: Mother nature don't evolve no specialized boss creatures.

Again, I'm no biologist (yet), but I really don't think the equation of Humans plus Cordyceps would equal Extinction. We were shaken up, and humankind has had some bad years. But the cordyceps probably isn't gonna grind us down much further than it has. It really is the clubbing-each-other-over-the-head problem that needs to be dealt with. Society in some form needs to re-assert itself, and after that, dealing with cordyceps will just become a part of life. If we become an armed populace, and adhere to some additional safety protocols, then we're golden. Come at me, Cordy.

If this truly is the last of us, if we get taken out by a bunch of *angry mushrooms*... Then fuck, son. We deserve to go down. But I don't think we would succumb. People are like rats, in a good way. We would find a way to survive.

The reading of the title that I prefer is that Joel is a representative of the last of us, as in the last of his generation. The last of the society that you and I are living in right now. The last to know such a decadent life, the last to be so utterly, brutally on top of the food chain. The last to have had such a shocking command over that old bitch, mother nature. Our generation, Joel's generation, is the one that could not accept a new world. We're the ones who cannot adapt to a loss of status, and who feel eternally bitter about any new status quo.

Joel's generation was brought physically low by the cordyceps; a gigantic number of people were infected or killed. But it was the loss of society that broke the survivors, in a spiritual sense. Not only did society disappear, but that society was revealed to have been ineffective, and ultimately uncaring. The enormous number of physical deaths could be blamed less on the cordyceps, and more on society's failure to maintain itself when placed under stress.

So, once everything was gone, and it became apparent that most of what we held dear was actually hollow bullshit... There was nothing left for Joel's generation to do but devolve into barbarism. If they couldn't have the old world, then they would rather have no world at all.

But after society fell, new people were born. It wasn't the last of us. And those new people were more resilient. They didn't have a true conception of how our society even worked. They only knew fragments of how we lived, little pieces gleaned from whatever junk we left behind.

That new generation is the one that Ellie is a part of, and the same way that Ellie has a generally positive outlook about life, I think a similar mindset could permeate amongst those new people. They may not have a vaccine, and may remain susceptible to the ravaging force of the cordyceps. But that doesn't mean those future people won't enjoy being alive. It doesn't mean they won't take up the mantle that each generation before them took up, as builders, and inventors, and explorers. If there are deadly spores in the world, then that's just how it is. They would accept it, and learn to deal with it. They wouldn't wish to have reality magically reformed, or returned to some prior state. Any reformation will have to come from their own hands, and they'll know that. Their spirits won't be broken.

To them, the old world would be nothing but images from movies and magazines. It wouldn't feel real; it might not even feel like something that *should* have been real. They may not have a particular desire for that old world to return. Maybe they'll view what we had as an aberration, as a kind of failed experiment.

Our current generation sees technology as a linear path: The human race continues forward, moving up and up and up. But if it all fell down, and people looked back on us -- The endless stores and restaurants and stores and restaurants -- It might seem like a kind of bad joke. An evolutionary cul-de-sac. Is the world we have now really what human life should look like? If the success of the human race is judged by proliferation, and lifespan, and the ease of day to day life, then we're kings. In that sense, we're killing it. The cordyceps infection would be one of the worst things that could happen to us. But if you judge the human race by the spirit of its members, and by their sense of pride in themselves...

Listen, I'm not saying that I'd call a pandemic down upon us, just to toughen us up. But as things stand, we are a soft group. We've got a whole planet overrun by ineffective, childlike humans. If our planet were showcased in a Star Trek episode, I think there would be a lot of tutting about the way that we are. There would be a disappointment at how out of touch we are with our physical reality, and how blind we are to the realities of our planet. Earth is like a world overrun by dodos, but with nothing in our immediate

environment that's able to kill us. So we just keep lolling around, getting softer and softer, while we wait for a cataclysm to occur.

So, say we were to get cordycepted. Say our whole society were felled. Death is birth, destruction begets reconstruction -- Actraiser taught us that. Once the dust has had some time to settle, and we look at the people who come after us, we may see that those people are actually stronger representatives of humankind than we were. They may have lost our technology, but their return to a more physical, less abstract kind of life, with smaller, more interconnected societies... that could be good for us. That could be good for our *spirit*. It'd build character, as Calvin's dad would say.

But, my tv! My fast food! My video games! My billions of fellow humans! Well... sure. But what can I say? Easy come, easy go. I know it's weird of me to criticize our decadent lifestyle, given that I'm writing a book about a video game. I put myself squarely in with the rest of you: If this town gets an enema, if humankind is ever put to a true test, we'll be lucky if anyone reading this book survives.

But I think often about the people of our past, the people who got our society to its current point. Their lives were very different from ours, and they were the true representatives of what the human race actually is. Our current, blandified world is very, very new. We really don't deserve what we have, and now that the barriers are down, we're spreading like a blind mold. We didn't earn what we have, we don't respect it, and our behavior is not sustainable. If the cordyceps doesn't get us, then some other Captain Tripps surely will.

One reason I like apocalypse stories is because they address that scenario. The stakes are high: It's make-or-break. We either live up to our birthright as proud human beings, born of the Earth... or we die. We die, brutally and horribly, with no higher power to notice, or to care. We blink from existence like we never mattered at all, because in our extinction, we didn't.

But the point of apocalypse stories isn't to dwell on how much we've lost; the point is to focus on how we're gonna survive. No matter what happens, we're gonna keep going. Right now, we may resemble a mold. But the truth is that we're rats. In a good way. No matter what happens, we are going to survive, and to thrive.

To me, that's the overall message of a story like The Last Of Us. It's not about the horrors of man, or about the terrible things we might do to each other. The message is that, even when things are this bad, even when things are almost over, we can and will find a way to keep going. We are endlessly inventive, and endlessly motivated. We won't let ourselves die.

Someday, we may be a mold that's taken over not just the Earth, but the whole Universe, because we are never gonna stop. We're the scariest, craziest, most adaptable thing that God ever accidentally allowed to live. It's gonna take a meteor the size of a moon to stop us, and soon, even that won't be enough.

That's your true birthright, as a human being. Not smart phones and tv shows. It's the fact that nothing can ultimately stop you. Anything that you want, you can make real. If you don't manage, then one of your successors will. It only takes pressure and time, and there's no pressure like us. Someday, we're gonna re-arrange planets.

That's the meaning of a story like *The Last Of Us*. We may be scary, and we may be cruel. But we're the most adaptable, amazing creatures in the known Universe. We won't stop, and we can't stop. You don't have to be proud of human beings and the things that we do. A lot of what we are is really fucking awful. But you can take pride in the fact that somehow, some way, no matter what is put in front of us – We don't have to fear any apocalypse. We are always going to overcome.

So, shit. In conclusion, I'd say this is a pretty good game. A strong 8 out of 10, easy.

The End

Left Behind

So, there it is. A book about The Last Of Us. All done! But of course, I'm still not done. I gotta have my Snap-Crackle-Pops. I've gotta talk about Left Behind.

Downloadable Content

I was having problems with the dang PlayStation the day Left Behind came out. It seemed to think it deserved custody of the kids, even though it never gave a shit about them before. That asshole fucking PS3. So I couldn't play Left Behind right away.

In general, I'm not a huge fan of DLC. Once I'm playing it, I have fun. But the initial idea seems like a chore, just something I have to finish before I can put a game on the shelf and move on. Let me move on, Sleeping Dogs! What am I even doing? Fighting Asian vampires? What is happening?

I knew Naughty Dog would do well, because whatever conventional wisdom I try to cling to, Naughty Dog always finds a way to break it. So I was looking forward to Left Behind. But I didn't want to let my expectations run away with me. My PlayStation was wigging out, but so what? What's the hurry? I'm not gonna let it get me in a twist. I won't jump through hoops for DLC! Most of the time, it's just some weird extra content produced so that people won't sell their games back to GameStop. I'm sure Naughty Dog had more venerable aims, but still -- Downloadable Content would be no boss of me.

As day-one discussion flared and grew, the wait to play Left Behind really started weighing on me. After a couple of days, it was killing me. I almost turned to the succubus arms of a Let's Play. My reckoning was that I could hold a controller, and pretend to play along with the guy on YouTube. He wouldn't have my sweet moves, but it'd still feel a little like I was actually playing.

I've had some pretty sad ideas in my time, but that may be the saddest. I mean, come on. How sad is that? Pretty sad. I mighta been a little drunk when I came up with it. I don't even remember that plan, to be honest. But it's in my notes, so I trust that it was something I really did consider doing. I was gonna pretend to play a video game. I'm glad I sobered up and waited for the PlayStation repair which, it turned out, only took a few days.

So Cool

Playing Left Behind, I was immediately struck by how good it felt to be back in the

world of The Last Of Us. Walking through the spore filled American Princess doll store felt so creepy... I was *in it*. That special feeling, the feeling that only The Last Of Us can bestow, was back. That may be a nerdy thing to say, but I just wrote a trillion page book on the subject, so I'm allowed.

The visual beauty of Naughty Dog's post-apocalypse world is ridiculous. Taking a break between The Last Of Us and Left Behind was a great opportunity to forget how amazing this game looks. The PlayStation 3 hardware was old as fuck by Left Behind's release: The PS3 came out in 2006, and Left Behind in 2014. A PC from that era would already be a joke. But the PlayStation 3, in Naughty Dog's hands, could still do amazing things.

To me, The Last Of Us actually looks better than a lot of high-end PC games. I'm not talking about the fancified PS4 version; I mean the PS3 version. I'm sure I wrote about this earlier, but I reckon the longevity of consoles must be due to the stability of the platform. In a game like The Last Of Us, or Uncharted 3, every piston of the PlayStation 3 is firing at full speed. Every part of the game is designed with those exact parameters in mind. And the end result are some stupidly beautiful games.

Even the best looking PC games still need to be able to run on lower end PCs; no matter how beautiful a game, some joker's gonna set that bad boy to 480x800 and rock out with his asshole on display. The availability of that Lo/Rez version seems to somehow seep over even into the high end version. PC games always look a little garish to me. I know some people with truly monstrous PC rigs, but the games never have the same conceptual unity that a Naughty Dog game does. PC games are being pulled in too many directions.

It may also have something to do with looking at a computer monitor, as opposed to a giant tv. But PC games feel more like a flat experience; they feel like something I'm looking at, rather than something I'm immersed in.

With my personal biography out of the way, let's talk about monsters.

Stalkers

One big moment I had while playing Left Behind is that I finally, *finally* learned to recognize the difference between regular Infected, and Stalkers. Stalkers are the ones who stalk around, it turns out. But it's pretty tough to tell the difference, because you're rarely able to appreciate a Stalker's stalking. They have such a hair trigger that if you make a single sound, or even no sound, they freak the fuck out and start running around all crazy. There's a trophy for managing to stealth-kill a Stalker, which is a trophy that I did not collect. And the sounds those assholes make are really fucking scary. Goddamn,

man. The Last Of Us.

That could be one reason I've fallen out of love with most movies -- When watching a movie, I rarely feel involved. I used to be scared by movies. When I was a kid, the tv show Unsolved Mysteries scared the shit out of me. Just hearing that theme music could give me the wig.

Now that I'm older, I wish I could be scared like that. I think I'd appreciate the experience. But sometimes, video games can still do that for me. Left Behind isn't heavily combat focused, but what combat there is is pretty frightening. One of those Stalker bastards actually made me jump. And I liked it! Then I responded by killing the shit out of that son of a bitch, and the Eternal Darkness cycle-of-fright was complete.

I'm not gonna go into a huge amount of detail about Left Behind. I'll just touch on a couple of major points. But it really is another dose of genius shit. Naughty Dog, man. Fantastic. Well met, peeps.

The Kiss

Before playing Left Behind, I had already seen a gif of Ellie giving Riley a kiss. The spoiler didn't bother me, 'cause as I've said, if I cared so much about spoilers, I should have gotten my shit together sooner.

After seeing that kiss, I was surprised that I hadn't considered Ellie's sexuality before. Ellie's strong attitude does fall in line with some of the tougher lesbians I've known, though that's obviously a generalization. Any discussion of sexuality is a minefield, just waiting to annoy somebody. But one way to describe Ellie's resilient attitude could be "boyish", particularly if you were a 1950s Scoutmaster. "That Ellie... how do I put this? She seems a bit... boyish. Has she spoken with her pastor? Get that girl into a nice skirt, and I'm sure everything will sort itself out."

Allison Bechdel's book *Fun Home* has a chapter about early lesbian activism in New York City, and it's pretty fascinating. It used to be illegal for women to wear too many articles of male clothing in public. It wasn't just something that was on the books; women literally got arrested for looking like men.

Things are somewhat better now, but society has always sucked, and it will always suck. Remember that, kids, the next time someone tries to enforce a ridiculous and arbitrary rule: Most people are nervous idiots, just following the parameters of whatever skewed idea of reality they grew up with.

If you live in Amsterdam and have a comically shallow toilet, or you live in America and someone cut part of your dick off, then you're part of the anthill. Somebody's fucking with you, and you're not even fighting back. You're just living in your grandpa's world, the same way that he was living in his grandpa's world.

If you blindly follow what people tell you, there's no end to the dumb shit that can result. It's not easy to be as awesome and rebellious as I am, but you gotta do it. You've got to, or somebody's gonna mutilate your kid's genitals. And you're gonna pretend that that's a good thing. You fucking idiot.

Ahem. As I understand it, Ellie's sexuality was given no strong consideration before the planning of Left Behind. But once it was decided that Ellie might be attracted to women, that characterization does seem to co-exist pretty well with what we know of Ellie from the original game.

That being said, I'm sure the reason I never initially considered Ellie's sexuality is because her attitude doesn't telegraph her sexuality. She could just as readily be a tough girl who likes guys, or a tough girl who likes girls. It's all fluid, man. It's, like, life. Life, and love, and mushroom based relentless killers. Breathe in that beautiful prana. One love, Babylon.

Gay/Not Gay

Seeing the gif of Ellie's kiss, divorced from any greater context, my initial thought was, "Whoah -- Ellie's gay!" My initial thoughts are often not particularly nuanced. In the time since Left Behind's release, a lot of pieces have been written about the fluidity of sexuality. Maybe Ellie's gay. Maybe she's bisexual. Maybe it's more situational -- Ellie could still be discovering who she is. Maybe she would have fallen for Riley, regardless of Riley's gender.

To all of those theories, I say: Cool. I love that Left Behind, like the main game, remains so open to interpretation. I think I've made it pretty clear that I think The Last Of Us is the best game ever, but dang -- It really is the best game ever. Close 2nd place: Decapattack, starring Chuck D. Head.

Hey, did you know that Psycho Fox was actually the predecessor to Decapattack? In Japan, both games came from the same series. You can never tell which way a localization is gonna go: Maybe make him into a fox, or maybe make him into a mummy. Whatever. Just make him into something.

I wish I could write a more coherent treatise on sexuality, without getting distracted by

Decapattack. But many other people have written far better pieces than I, and I'll list them below:

<http://www.google.com>

Old World Blues

I spoke before about how an apocalypse could potentially help reform society into a new, stronger, and more glorious version of itself. That was one of the many rants which I will no doubt disavow in the event of a true apocalypse. But I think our current society's hang-ups with sexuality are a prime example of behavior that could use a nice, vigorous apocalypse scrub.

Say 99.9% of the world were to get theyselves kilt. Then the left-over people had some babies -- Would that new generation have any space in their minds for pointless discrimination? I mean, I'm sure a few jerks would. But everyone else would be far too busy, spending their time constructing and maintaining radioactive slime farms, and whatnot.

A traumatic event can change a person -- After a shake up, one often finds that their old values are no longer relevant. Could that happen to an entire society? When some old-timer told the children of the apocalypse that certain types of sexuality were detrimental and wrong, maybe the real truth would be too evident for the new generation to ignore. The post-apoca-kids would see the real problems of the world, and would recognize the true issues; the old-timers' bullshit would seem blazingly evident, in the day-glow colors of a radioactive slime pie. The once-pressing issue of "who other people want to kiss" would be considered of no consequence.

In fact, denying someone a relationship for the sole reason of old-world values would probably strike the new gen as extra-ridiculous. The old world held those beliefs? Well, where is that old world now? What did that old world accomplish, besides collapsing horribly? Fuck that old world, and fuck whatever old-world stragglers are still trying to hold on to it.

In a few decades, the old-worlders would die off. Everyone on Earth would have been born post-apocalypse; society would be fully, completely new. In a sense, that's always happening. But it's normally a gradual transition, so gradual that we seem to stay eternally mired in the prejudices of the past.

But if a skeleton crew is all that's left of the old generation, those people would be easy to ignore, and even easier to forget. Maybe I'm just a dreamer, dreaming of a world where everyone wears tattered pants, and human life expectancy has dropped by

decades. But in that new society, perhaps the old-world prejudices would find no soil in which to take root. Maybe love... could bloom even on a battlefield.

In the midst of these swirling thoughts, at the very height of my pro-apocalypse mania, I realize that Left Behind came out on Valentine's Day. That is so fucking genius. I love Naughty Dog, man. I love everyone who had anything to do with The Last Of Us. And to show my appreciation, I will now list every team member, below:

<http://www.google.com>

Holy Joel

The marquee storyline of Left Behind is obviously Ellie and Riley. But the game also delves into the fallout of Joel being impaled on a piece of rebar, and of Ellie trying to save his life. Lara Croft coulda shaken off that wound by rubbing a little dirt on it, but Joel has a significantly tougher time. He is unable to "walk it off", as it were.

Freshly punctured Joel can barely speak or move; he's in torpor. Watching Ellie examine his wound, I feel bad for the guy. Lying on the floor, bleeding and barely conscious, it seems very unimportant to pass judgment on his character. It doesn't matter what Joel's done in the past, or what he'll do in the future -- His injured state makes it very clear that fundamentally, he's the same as any other person. When you boil it down, he's just an organism trying to survive.

This is gonna sound dippy, but watching that scene, of Joel lying on the cold floor, I had some thoughts. I started thinking about how the person the least like us in the entire world is still basically just like us. I know it's trite, but it's true. It's damn true. We're all spawned from the same biological vichyssoise, whose origin we can never understand. We try to survive for as long as we can. And eventually, we die.

That might be too general a sentiment to really mean much. But for a video game to help me feel a little empathy, and to help me feel a little more in touch with humankind, is a pretty great thing. All I'm doing is watching a little cg movie, of one person trying to dress another person's wound. But by the merit of the time already spent with these characters, these small moments seem to mean a lot.

Last Chance For Romance

Here it is: My last opportunity to ply you with some grand ideas about stupid video games.

As a kid, I felt something while playing video games that I couldn't experience anywhere else. It was a spark, and I think a lot of us felt that way -- Video games seemed more exciting than anything else we could do; they felt important.

That feeling was sometimes obscured by controller-throwing rage. But beneath those surface feelings of love and hate, video games seemed to be communicating with us, in a way that previous generations weren't able to apprehend. Video games were a new art form, a new thing, and they were our thing.

Games like The Last Of Us remind me of that feeling. They help me see that the way I felt about video games in my youth was not misguided. Video games will always feel more personal to people like us than other art forms do. It's a medium which is exciting, in a way that really can't be explained. Personally interfacing with the artform is the only way to feel what it has to express.

Most games may not mean much, and that feeling of potential may not come to the surface very often. But sometimes, I can really feel it. And sometimes, it seems like it's looking right at me.

Then I go, "Whoah! H- holy cats! IT'S LOOKING RIGHT AT ME! Who else is seeing this? Is somebody seeing this? It's -- Ah, it's gone."

So after that, I hunker down with some weird games from a Steam sale; I wait with the faith of a lifelong zealot, because I know that gaming's potential will manifest itself again. People like you and me, we demonstrate our piety by holding a controller, and by concentrating on a screen. A lot of it might not mean much, but we keep sifting and searching. We stay vigilant, because we know that eventually, the planets will align. Eventually, that live-wire will re-connect.

The Arcade

A lot of my strongest memories of being a kid come from going to the arcade. My parents took me to Disney World, and that was pretty cool. But when my dad would take me to the dimly lit arcade in the local mall, those are the memories that really lasted a lifetime.

Riley and Ellie have a lot of great moments as they explore the abandoned mall, but my favorite is when they go to the arcade. Winston spent all his time in that mall, drinking and riding his horse; it's a shame he didn't use some of that time to get a couple of the old games up and running. It's also a shame that he's dead, but I'm just saying -- All those abandoned arcade games, man.

Because the games are broken, Riley has Ellie close her eyes, and helps her imagine that she's playing a fighting game called The Turning. I don't know how many people would choose that as their favorite part of Left Behind, but for me, that scene pulled a lotta strings.

In my adulthood, arcades have become a rare find. In 2005, I found an arcade in Vancouver, on Granville Street. In 2008, a girl took me to Barcade, in Brooklyn. There was a temporary arcade at PAX East when I went in 2012. And in 2015, I found that the arcade in Vancouver was somehow *still open*.

I was amazed when I saw that. I don't know if they signed a ninety-nine year lease or what, but I never expected to walk into that place again. A lot of things were exciting about returning to Vancouver, but playing Raiden II late at night, with a bunch of quarters in my pocket, gave me a unique feeling of connectedness to the city.

I felt like I had traveled back to 2005, when I had first found that arcade. I felt like I had traveled back to 1995, when Raiden II was still relatively new. I felt like I had traveled back to 1985, when I would be at arcades with my dad, standing on a footstool so I could reach the controls.

The experience of standing in front of an arcade cabinet is something that stretches back through my entire life. I had birthday parties at specific restaurants just because they had one arcade cabinet. If a convenience store near my house had a game, be it Crystal Castles or Rush'n Attack, all of my quarters would go into it. It makes sense to me that Ellie would want to experience that feeling.

I have a pretty relaxed attitude about the things we would lose in an apocalypse: Oh, we don't get to drive cars anymore? Wow, what a shame. We can't watch tv shows? Fuck! What are we gonna do? How will we go on?

Mainly, I see the apocalypse as a way for the human race to quit it with their bullshit. I know that's a childish view -- The cheesecake eating, latte drinking fuckfaces of the world may not necessarily deserve a full-on apocalypse. But they could certainly use a wake up call. The entitlement of North Americans makes me barf in my mouth, then swallow that barf, and barf again, in perpetuity.

Under that highly-suspect value system, the idea of losing creature comforts doesn't carry much weight with me. But seeing an abandoned arcade does resonate. It seems sad that Ellie will never get to have that experience. It makes sense to me that she finds ice cream trucks ridiculous, but that she has a longing to go to an arcade.

Thunder Blade

When a new arcade opened in our city, my dad would always take me and my brother to check it out. He knew a lot of the arcade managers -- In retrospect, I think he was sneaking out to play games without us. Nowadays he mostly only plays World Of Tanks, but in the eighties, my dad was on top of the video game scene. Even now, he's pretty fucking good at World Of Tanks.

One time, I remember Dad taking us to the arcade in the mall, and giving me and my brother each a whole roll of quarters. I fed most of mine into a stand-up Thunder Blade machine, which I also had at home on the Sega Master System. I was pretty enthralled, because the Super Scaler version was way, way better than on the Master System.

I had enough quarters to get me all the way to the fourth stage, and then to the final boss. On the Master System, I could never get past the third stage, and in fact still can't. That game is fucking impossible. So I was in the middle of a Thunder Blade bullet hell, with no sign of victory in sight.

I came to my last quarter, and as my helicopter inevitably crashed and burned, I had a high-pressure decision to make: I knew I was never gonna make it past that boss. With my shitty kid dexterity, I would need another five or six quarters, at least. I only had ten seconds to decide -- Do I spend my last quarter, and give it one last try? Or do I quit, and go play something else?

I had put most of the day's investment into reaching the end of Thunder Blade, and it would have been amazing to tell everyone that I'd beaten it. But that really wasn't realistic. I knew I wasn't gonna succeed, and I didn't want my memory of that day to end in defeat. I wanted my time with Thunder Blade to end on my own terms.

So I let go of the flight stick, and watched as the timer counted down to zero. Then I took a stroll around the arcade, and decided to spend my last quarter on a Kid Niki cabinet that was tucked away in the corner. Kid Niki: Radical Ninja is not the greatest game. But even now, I remember that feeling of calm. I remember how much better I felt about giving up, and trying something different.

Quit

I don't mean to suggest that that day at the arcade was deeply formative. But I have always remembered it, and looking back, I've followed a similar pattern in all my decision-making. If something is hard, people will tell you to persevere. Struggle on! Life is about challenge! Sure, you may go down in a ball of flaming wreckage. But what

if you don't? What if you overcome? What if you beat the last boss of Thunder Blade, despite the towering evidence to the contrary? Why, then you'd be a hero! You'd be the king!

I've always found that attitude to lead to some really irresponsible advice. Anyone telling you to toil away at something demoralizing and unrealistic, be they teacher, parent, or state-appointed handler, is probably someone you don't wanna listen to. I'm firmly of the opinion that giving up is a fully valid choice, and is in fact a very important choice.

Quitting will close off one particular avenue. Hell, it may close off many avenues. But it will also open up another set of paths, and one of those new paths will be much better suited to your particular disposition. You don't feel the urge to quit because you're lazy. You feel the urge to quit because you're in the wrong place, and you're doing the wrong thing.

You shouldn't quit something immediately, of course -- Everything requires a certain amount of effort, blah blah blah. But if the path you're on doesn't seem exciting, it's probably not gonna become any moreso through sheer hard-headedness. If something isn't fun, and if fun is nowhere on the horizon, then you should strongly consider not doing that thing.

It took me two years to write this book. If it had not been fun to write, I would not have finished writing it. But I would have done something else, and that other project would have been equally valid. As it stands, I had to quit a lot of other things in order to write this book. Quitting is not the big deal that people make it out to be. Quitting is the first step toward doing what you really wanna do.

Not many people will tell you that you should quit. They'll say that you should finish what you start, or that you have a duty now for the future. But I will never tell you that. I say quit, quit, and then quit again. Give something an honest shot, and if it ain't working out, then tip your hat, say fare thee well, and get the fuck out of there.

Someday, you can fire up an emulator, and you can beat that last boss in Thunder Blade. You can even use save-states to beat the nightmarish Master System version. You can go at your own pace, and along your own path. Whatever you're feeling pressured to do: It doesn't have to happen right here, and it doesn't have to happen right now.

It's A Far Cry Life

Let's say that life is like Far Cry 3. I think we can all agree that that's basically accurate.

What we wanna do is run around the island; we wanna swim in the ocean! We wanna take down outposts! We wanna do those things, because they're fun!

We might sprinkle in some story missions, to unlock some items, or to see what Vaas is up to. But if those story missions start to make us miserable, and they will, then we don't have to finish them. We're not honor bound to do some dumb missions made up by some random asshole.

And the truth is that taking down outposts is at least as much work as completing story missions. It may even be *more* work. But it doesn't feel like work, because it's exciting to do. North Americans have a real hard-on for making themselves miserable; they think work doesn't count, unless it's a miserable slog that no one would ever want to do. To them, work is duty. Grim, boring duty.

That may have been a reasonable view during frontier times, or during other harsh eras. But we are far from those worlds, and the new apocalypse hasn't hit us yet.

Life is short, and we only get one go. So we can't let anyone guilt us into doing strict, failure-prone story missions, when that ain't what we wanna do. Life ain't about that! Life is about shooting guns, and injecting syringes filled with concoctions we ourselves have devised, and leaping from cliffs where hang gliders have been conveniently abandoned. *That's* what life is! Metaphorically!

When we're laying on our respective deathbeds, thinking back to all the story missions we were coerced into finishing throughout our lives, I think we'll find that those missions were a total fucking drag. Finding our own path is where the fun was. Those story missions, which we only did because we were *supposed* to... Man -- Those really didn't mean shit.

If Reader's Digest made a condensed version of this book, I wonder how long it would be? Thirty pages? Thank god we live in a digital future, where no one is spared even a moment of my scattershod (sic) thoughts.

You've really read all of this. That's amazing! Thank you! I appreciate it. I'm sure my follow-up book, *Kickle Cubicle And Post-Industrialization*, will be somewhat shorter.

The Turning

The scariest part of Left Behind is the scene that we don't see.

We've gotten to know Riley; she's not just a name from Ellie's past. We've heard her talk, and seen her move. She's a full person, and we've learned that she meant more to Ellie than we could have guessed.

But we don't see Riley turn. We don't see Ellie watch her deteriorate. We don't know what Ellie did when it became clear that only Riley was infected. Ellie didn't say that she abandoned Riley; she said that Riley was the first to die. Whatever happened, Ellie was there, and it must have been really, really horrifying.

I think back to Joel in the ranch house in Wyoming, telling Ellie that she had no idea what loss is. If Joel had known about this, I think he might have bit his tongue.

We never see Riley's last moments; but we do see Ellie standing in front of an arcade machine, her eyes closed, a static glow shining against her face. Riley is guiding her through the experience of playing The Turning, by describing the game to her. It's like Riley is telling Ellie a fairy tale, from a world that's long gone.

Neither Ellie nor Riley have played that game, nor been to that world. It's just as much of a fairy tale to each of them. But this is something that humans do for each other -- We tell stories. We concoct tales to help us feel more sure of ourselves. We try to make the present seem easier, and try to help each other feel stronger about facing tomorrow. Regardless of the state of our lives, or the state of the human race, our habit of telling stories doesn't go away.

I sat on my couch late at night, watching those two people, alone in an abandoned mall. I thought about how that mall was only a small piece of a decaying city, and how that city was just a speck in a now mostly-empty world. But in that tiny moment, Riley was giving Ellie a taste of a world she would never see. Riley was telling Ellie a story, and crafting for her a moment that she might remember for the rest of her life.

A feeling started welling in my chest, which was kind of sad and happy at the same time. I didn't really know what it was, and I figured it would pass. I watched Ellie execute imaginary combos, listening to the clack of the arcade buttons, and the spring of the joystick. And instead of passing, the feeling got stronger.

I thought back to when Street Fighter II first arrived in arcades. I was pretty young, but it was still clear how that game had rejuvenated the arcade scene. Every arcade had a Street Fighter II machine, and every one talked about it, a lot. If there was a definitive

finish to the SNES vs Genesis battles, I don't think it was Mario or Zelda who turned the tide. It was when the SNES got Street Fighter II. At that point, the war was over.

I've talked about feeling a sense of connectedness to video games, and Street Fighter II upped that ante considerably. Every gamer seemed tuned in to its frequency; not just in North America, but all over the world. It wasn't something we only played at home -- We played Street Fighter II in public spaces. We met with other gamers, and put our quarters up against theirs. As a community, we focused our attention on this one game, and gave it our collective blessing.

Without the benefit of any online technology, Street Fighter II made us all feel connected. The phenomenon was different from the days of Pac-Man Fever, which was more of a pop-cultural fad. Street Fighter II was a phenomenon that existed only amongst gamers. But amongst us, almost everyone was on board.

That feeling of connectedness may be what's most important about video games; wanting to feel connected is the driving force behind a lot of what we do as humans. From drugs, to religion, to romance -- It's been argued that anything we can become addicted to is just a stand-in for a larger feeling of unity. We want to feel like we're a part of something bigger than our solitary life.

Riley couldn't give Ellie the literal experience of playing a video game; but she could give Ellie a feeling of connectedness. By playing that game together, Riley was letting Ellie know that she wasn't alone. Someone was there with her.

To me, that seemed like the clearest example of how much Riley cared about Ellie. Like I said, I don't know if the arcade was anybody else's favorite scene in *Left Behind*. But I found it really wonderful, and really beautiful. Sitting in my house, late at night, the feeling in my chest started to overwhelm me. I had to pause the game, and put my head in my hands. I sat there, just me and *The Last Of Us*, and had myself a little cry.

Postscript

Listening to interviews about The Last Of Us with Neil Druckmann and Bruce Straley, I'm struck by how they always seem to say the right things. Even their offhand comments offer a lot of insight into game design.

From what I've learned about the making of the game, it certainly wasn't a straightforward process. Bruce and Neil fought hard to include certain ideas, while knowing to limit others -- The number of variables involved was staggering.

Bruce Straley had a great quote, from a Reddit A.M.A., asking about the dark tone of the game:

"Making [The Last Of Us] is more emotionally draining than the material we're working with, to be honest."

We can never truly know the amount of work that went into making The Last Of Us. So I'd like to dedicate this book to Bruce and Neil, and to the whole team who made The Last Of Us a reality.

Grant

If you're looking for more Last Of Us content, I recommend the YouTube channel of Grant Voegtle. There's a lot of great Last Of Us stuff online, but nobody has knocked it out of the park like Grant.

I found him through his video "The Last Of Us Changed My Life", and with the release of the PS4 Photo Mode, he created The Last Of Us Cinematic Playthrough. From his "Time" trailer, to his dissertations on the multiplayer, I don't think any other single fan has done as much cool stuff with The Last Of Us as Grant. So if you haven't seen his stuff, I highly recommend it.

The Last of Us Changed My Life: In Depth Analysis and Dissection

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3sJA-C1yrtk>

Coda: Redeeming My Sins

During the writing of this book, I remained vaguely bothered by the times when I picked up items without needing to. Early in the playthrough I used a 2x4 to kill a Clicker in the Financial District, a molotov to torch a Clicker in the subway, and a pair of bricks to set off tripwires in Bill's Town.

I know these small indiscretions don't really matter, as my end-of-game equipment tally showed that I had plenty of resources I could have applied to those problems. In hindsight, my inventory-hoarding was entirely due to worry about the High School Bloater. If I had arrived at that fight without the resources to complete it, the playthrough would have been over, and I may not have written this book. So I was nervous, dude.

The High School Bloater, as we learned, is a chump. I had nothing to worry about. So I decided to return to the early parts of the game, and confirm that I could complete them without picking anything up.

I'm going through a bit of a minimalism phase, so I don't currently have a PlayStation 3 or 4; all of my recent gaming has been done on a laptop. But a week-long visit to my friend Matt offered a perfect opportunity for absolution -- I could play *The Last Of Us: Remastered* while he was at work, and exercise the itemless techniques I'd learned during my previous playthrough. I also set the game to Grounded difficulty, because fuck it -- If you're gonna repent, you may as well make your suffering as acute as possible.

These notes will be fairly sparse, without going into too much detail. But if you've come this far, maybe you're willing to come a little further. Eh? Shawshank Reference. Rad.

Itemless Playthrough Redemption Chronicle Gaiden: Grounded Edition

The Prologue: Sarah wears a Halican Drops shirt, which I didn't notice originally. Joel's watch is very prominent as he applies compression to Sarah's chest. Depressing.

Boston: It's now been a full three years since *The Last Of Us*' release, and the game's age is starting to seem a little noticeable. The character models sometimes look a bit stiff. I think I actually prefer the PS3 version to the remaster, as the game feels more natural on that platform. As beautiful as this game is, it is clearly a PS3-era game.

I shoot the guy trapped under rubble, unlike last time. Joel then immediately scratches the back of his head. Garsh, mister! You sure got yourself into a pickle! Welp, you're

dead now! Golly! I really don't care for that head scratch animation.

The initial batch of Infected get a hit on me, which means that one punch can now take me out. For the first time, I have to consciously avoid knocking over noisy scenery, such as empty paint cans. Otherwise, Robert's goons will immediately rush me. I can, however, still absorb several bullets. I guess bullets don't pack the same wallop as a good old fashioned punch. I die a few times on the way to Robert, but it's no biggie. I'm just getting my sea legs back.

When we first meet Ellie, there's a restaurant menu board, and I'm disappointed to note that it does not include "Wing Dings & Things".

The Clicker Arena: This is the location of my original sin -- I used a 2x4 to kill the Clicker, as I was afraid to spend ammo. This time, I exterminate the group of Infected, and test out different techniques for dispatching Mr. Clickface.

Shooting Clicky is difficult, because one headshot isn't enough, and I have a hard time landing two. I can punch the Clicker four times before it bites me, so maybe I can punch it, then shoot it, or vice versa.

In the end, I don't have to do either, because I manage to glitch through a wall. I'm just fucking around, trying to pull the cart away from the exit passage, when an Infected attacks me and somehow pops Joel into the next room. I proceed forward, and Tess & Ellie appear behind me. I carry on, considering this glitch to be fair game. But my conscience will soon draw me back.

Underground: The next sticky section is the Clicker posted next to a ladder. This guy always stuck in my mind, as I broke my vows and picked up a molotov in order to torch him. I later realized that Tess had given me the ingredients for a molotov, so I could have used that.

On Grounded difficulty, Tess didn't give me shit. So I reprise my technique of trying to punch Clickers in the face, and it works! I get in three punches, the Clicker attacks Tess, and I keep punching it until it dies. I did it! It took some companion help, but I finally killed a Clicker with my bare fists! Nice!

Then the other Clickers ambush and kill me. So punching that one Clicker is not enough.

I get really good at sneaking up to the initial Clicker, punching him twice, then running away from the ensuing monster mob. I eventually learn that if I hide in the far corner, near the note with the safe combination, I can wait out the frenzy. I sneak back to the ladder, and press triangle... but an L3 prompt informs me that I cannot activate it. It

highlights the Clicker, reminding me that it's still alive and angry.

Through sneaky means, I manage to punch Clicky twice more, then run back to my safety corner. I'm unexpectedly attacked by an Infected who I didn't realize I had left alive. I fight it off, taking massive damage, while the Clickers all swarm in. I back myself into the corner as Ellie gets attacked, and I'm sure that it's all over.

Then, *Tess* rescues Ellie. You don't often see one NPC save another, so that's lucky. In the ensuing chaos, I manage to slip by, run back to the ladder, and this time I'm able to pull it down.

I'm not sure why the ladder can now be activated. Did Tess happen to kill our Clicker of interest? Are the angry Clickers far enough away? I have no idea. But somehow, I make it through. I was really starting to think this section might be impossible, without bowing to the tutorial's insistence that I throw a molotov or a brick. The narrowness of tutorials really can fuck you sometimes.

Return To The Clicker Arena: I'm so pleased with my newfound ability to punch Clickers that I decide to reload the previous Clicker fight. Glitching through a wall was an honest mistake, but that's really not good enough to wash away my 2x4 sin. If I'm extremely careful, I think I can punch this Clicker out.

The trick to punching a Clicker is to sneak up behind or beside it, punch it twice, then run away. It's extremely finicky and time consuming, but that "punching a Clicker is ineffective" message is not strictly true. Punching a Clicker *is* effective, it's just really dumb.

It takes many tries, which are made more laborious by having to clear out the whole arena each time. But I manage to do it. I sneak up, get in a punch, hide, repeat. It takes, I think, seven punches? I lose count, because my head feels kind of swimmy afterward. Damn, man... I can't believe I finally punched out a Clicker, all by myself. That's insane.

The Museum Battle: I have extremely bad memories of this fight on Survivor difficulty. Now, any attack will also kill me immediately. I follow the same technique as last time, running a circle around the room, and throwing a quick punch when I can. I manage to clear the area in only three tries. Cool.

The Capitol Building: After poor Tess dies, I manage to duck and weave my way through all the soldiers while only taking one grazing shot. I'm not gonna lie, it's pretty fucking great.

Bill's Town: Originally, I had picked up some bricks to set off Bill's traps. This time, I

try the novel approach of running right through the wires.

It doesn't work for the first tripwire, which is a double set. It's far too explodey, so I use a bullet for that one. But the second tripwire can be run right through. It hurts, but it ain't lethal, and that's all that matters.

Absolution!

So, that does it. I've covered the arena Clicker, the sentry Clicker, and the tripwires. I can now be assured safe passage into Last Of Us heaven. The rest of the game is just a matter of hard-headed perseverance.

But I've still got some visiting time left. So, let's see how much further I can push forward with this pointless, nightmarish task. Yay!

The Continued Chronicle Of Itemless Suffering (Grounded Mode) aka An Incredibly Poor Use Of My Time

Traveling With Bill: I'm getting much more comfortable with punching Clickers. I can get in a couple of hits, then leave Bill to do the clean-up. It reminds me of how I deliberately stopped using shotguns in Spelunky, because I preferred being able to whip arrows out of the air -- I'm getting into some super-niche techniques, here.

The School: The hallways leading to the gym Bloater are crazy hard. There are three Clickers in a narrow space, and leaving them for Bill isn't realistic. I start allotting myself one shotgun shell to take out a Clicker, and it helps, but I still can't make it all the way through. As usual, any attack from an enemy causes my instant death.

Eventually, I get lucky. My successful run doesn't even require a firearm, just my fists. But this section is definitely the first truly miserable section of the playthrough.

Gym Bloater: Get this -- You can punch a Bloater. As long as the Bloater is busy preparing a spore-bomb, you can give it a thump and run away, remaining unkillled. Like with the Clickers, death is not purely proximity-based. The Bloater doesn't need to take a physical swing at you, but it does need to be in a neutral state before its death-grab animation can trigger. As long as it's busy doing something else, then you're very-slightly safe.

I never manage to get more than a couple of punches in before having my face pulled off, and I'm not crazy enough to keep at it. But I bet it's possible. Somewhere out there,

on some alternate Earth, I bet there's some crazy bastard who is able to punch a Bloater to death.

As mentioned, I no longer have Tess' molotov ingredients. But Bill did give me the items required to make a nail bomb, as well as a second bomb in my inventory.

It takes both nail bombs and all three of my shotgun shells to fell the Bloater. Ideally, you can kill the Bloater in two shots, but due to Bill slacking off, or my own shitty aim, my eventual victory run requires all three shells. Two explosions, and two shotgun blasts... Man. Punching a Bloater really would take forever.

Harder than the boss, by far, are the three Runners who drop down afterward. With no NPCs to alter their pathing, they stay clumped on Joel's heels. Any error leads to a swift death, so I have to slowly take single punches when the rare opportunity arises. It takes many, many tries, and I have to replay the entire boss battle before each attempt. It's a rough afternoon.

I do notice that the Bloater's spore-bombs can bank off of level geometry before they explode. He does a trick shot that gets me right in the face. Nice one, Bloaty!

Pittsburgh: The spotlight fight with Sam and Henry is *extremely* tough. The enemies are very organized, and it's hard to take one guy out without another enemy spotting you. I'm prepared to give up at this point, but I eventually succeed -- I hide to the right of the generator, and choke fools as soon as they drop from the barricade. It's pretty exploitative, but hey: Fuck these guys. Am I right?

Ish's Stronghold: I reach new levels of fed up during the standoff at the end of the Ish section. Ellie will open the door, but I can never cajole Joel into going through. Maybe there are Infected standing too close, or maybe I need to survive for another couple of seconds to trigger the exit animation. Whatever it is, Joel will just not go through that fucking door.

I eventually get annoyed enough that I start firing my revolver with abandon. I use eight of my twelve revolver bullets, and not in a careful way. Half of the shots don't hit anybody. But that's the price you pay for letting exasperation get the best of you. The wheels are definitely falling off this playthrough. I'm rapidly hitting a point where I just don't give a fuck any more.

Dodging The Sniper: This section on Grounded difficulty is a real kick in the dick, but it does follow a certain logic. If you take an especially circuitous route through the level, the sniper's next shot will be noticeably wild, since he's lost track of your location. That's a cool detail. A mere million tries, and I'm through.

I make it to Fall, and I think that's plenty. I've already spent most of my visit playing video games, and I've now got a plane to catch. But I'm confident that completing the rest of the game would only be a matter of time. There's nothing else as distinctly bottlenecky as that underground sentry-Clicker, with his feet bolted to the floor, and his psychic connection to the exit ladder.

It's ironic how often bottlenecks will happen toward the beginning of a game, as a player's options are deliberately narrowed in order to tutorialize specific mechanics. Far Cry 3, for example, caused me to consistently fail an early mission simply because I tried to drive home, instead of using fast-travel. I've mentioned that example already, but I still feel its painful indignity. I know how to fast-travel, Far Cry. You unbelievable prick.

So, on that bizarre and utterly irrelevant note, I declare this coda: Closed!

Website

You can find the latest revision of this book, or listen to my various podcasts, at:

<http://www.KeithCourage.com>

Keith Courage! Just like the TurboGrafx game! Remember that? No? Well, that's fair.

Email

If you'd like to drop me a line, you can do so at:

keithmpire@hotmail.com

That's right. Hotmail! The most nostalgic of mails. And there's twitter, as well.

<http://twitter.com/keithmcnally>

If you enjoyed this book, please spread the word!

Thanks very much for reading this book! I'm sure I could have done it without you, but why would I wanna? Look at that handsome face. Your smile is its own reward. Maybe if you're free later, we could get a coffee..?

You're busy? No, that's okay. No, yeah, it's cool. There's a lot... there's a lot going on... with our respective lives. Look, don't explain. It's fine. I'll just -- I'm just gonna go. Yeah. Later.

*The
End*